

The Collapse of the Palestinian Authority: The Scenario Israel Must Avoid

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Over the past two years, the collapse of the Palestinian Authority (PA) has been touted as a very realistic possibility, given the Israeli government's policy of implementing "facts on the ground"; that is, expanding the settlement enterprise in a way that is, for the most part, irreversible and undermines the already weak position of the PA. The collapse—or toppling—of the PA would set the Israeli–Palestinian process back more than 30 years and would place Israel in an immensely difficult situation in terms of international diplomacy. The collapse of the PA would be considered the harbinger of the end of the age of agreements and could even persuade the moderate Arab states to end their efforts to normalize relations with Israel. In addition, the PA's collapse would bring an end to the shared interests of Israel and the PA, which has been expressed in security cooperation, usually to Israel's satisfaction. It is also feasible that those Palestinians serving in the PA's security forces could turn on Israel—tens of thousands of armed men who could join the Palestinian factions' violent struggle against Israel. In the absence of the PA as a moderating factor, it is also possible that a popular uprising could break out in the territories.

Since the current Israeli government was established in 2022, the process of weakening and delegitimizing the Palestinian Authority (PA) has been accelerated, against the backdrop of the so-called "decisive plan" touted by Bezalel Smotrich, Israel's finance minister who also serves as a minister in the Defense Ministry. Smotrich's plan is to end the Israeli–Palestinian conflict without a diplomatic process. National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir also has demanded an increase in the use of force against the Palestinians. Because of the political seniority of these two ministers, the Palestinians and relevant bodies on the international stage view their respective plans as official Israeli policy. The collapse of the PA is one of the most tangible threats ever made against the Palestinians. Among other things, it is unclear how the collapse of the PA would serve the idea of Palestinian autonomy, which some of the right-wing parties in Israel support as the solution that should be imposed on the Palestinians. After all, it is doubtful that any alternative leadership will emerge and then Israel will have to assume

responsibility for the daily lives of the Palestinian population across the West Bank.

The events of October 7 and the subsequent war in the Gaza Strip engendered massive anger in Israel toward Hamas and the Palestinians in general. The declaration by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that “Fatahstan equals Hamastan” also contributed to the public mood in Israel, which favored deleting the phrases “Palestinian state” and “two-state solution” from the Hebrew lexicon, along with any measures that would weaken the PA. The government recently approved a series of measures aimed at punishing and weakening the PA. Among these measures were decisions to increase the amount of money that Israel withholds from the tax revenue it collects on behalf of the Palestinian Authority; a bill was introduced to allow victims of terrorist activity to sue the PA; efforts are underway to sever ties between Israeli banks and their counterparts in the Palestinian territories; Palestinian workers, most of whom work in the construction industry, have been refused entry to Israel; there has been a significant increase in the number of housing units constructed in existing settlements across the West Bank; several illegal outposts and settlements have been retroactively authorized; and the Israeli government also decided to revoke the Palestinian Authority’s control over Area B of the West Bank, which is defined as a nature reserve, and to assume control of it. The Knesset added its own dimension to these moves when it passed a declarative resolution opposing the establishment of a Palestinian state. The resolution was passed by 68 votes to nine.

This is why there is growing concern among those close to PA chairman Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), within the ranks of the PA’s security forces, and the Palestinian arena in general over the possibility of sanctions being imposed by the Israeli government. They want to believe that the United States and the international community will not allow Israel to bring about the dissolution or collapse of the PA because of both sides’ commitment to the Oslo Accords.

Even before October 7, Abu Mazen and many other senior Palestinian figures warned about the catastrophic effects of Israeli policies on the already shaky security situation faced by Palestinians in the West Bank and the increased tensions between Palestinians and Jewish settlers. On the Palestinian front, there has been a months-long argument in which Hamas has been accused of bringing disaster upon the Palestinian people. The argument, which will only intensify once the war is over, will make it even more difficult to advance reconciliation efforts between the various Palestinian factions and, at the same time, increase concern among Fatah and those close to Abu Mazen over the measures carried out by the

Israeli government threatening to collapse the PA. This is not a case of the Palestinians voluntarily dismantling the PA, as they did in 2012 and 2013 (when the international community still recognized the PA's capabilities and saw it as an effective and constructive player) to protest the lack of progress toward a peace deal. Rather, there is immense concern about Israel's punitive measures, the goal of which is to diminish the PA still further—or even force it to collapse.

Against this backdrop, it is clear that the status of the PA as a Palestinian nationalist symbol is more important than how well it functions. Even after October 7, Fatah officials closest to Abu Mazen have stressed in their arguments with Hamas and other groups supporting the Islamic resistance their accomplishments vis-à-vis Israel in the period leading up to the Oslo Accords: a return to their homeland, the release of more than 6,000 Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails all at once, the establishment of national institutions in the heart of Palestine, and growing international recognition for an independent Palestinian state. As they see it, the PA is the key body in Palestine, and Hamas threatens its existence. At the same time, Hamas has adopted the same view of the Palestinian Authority—but as a platform to assume its “legitimacy” in the Palestinian arena, when it decided to compete in the 2006 elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council and planned to do so again in 2021 but was stymied by the decision to cancel the election. Abu Mazen—who portrays the Oslo Accords as the crowning achievement of the Palestinian Liberation Organization and views Hamas's armed resistance as the folly of an organization that refuses to learn from past experience—insists that the PA still has an important role to play, given that it is the most obvious expression of a national presence in Palestine.

The Dangers of the Ongoing Weakening

The continued process of weakening the PA will exacerbate the following serious phenomena, which have become increasingly evident in recent months:

- Only partial payment of the salaries of PA employees. This will affect the motivation and functioning of the Palestinian security forces, about which Israel's top defense officials are extremely worried since it could encourage some Palestinian security officers to join terrorist groups in exchange for funds sent from Iran.
- The weakened functioning of the Palestinian security forces—despite adhering to the security coordination—because they are portrayed as serving the Israeli occupation and have lost their legitimacy.

- The spread of terror to the south of Judea and Samaria, partly due to the encouragement of both Hamas and Iran.
- A rise in clashes between Jewish settlers and Palestinians, which increases tension across the West Bank, boosts Palestinians' motivation to carry out terror attacks, and inflames the domestic Israeli discourse.
- Diminishing the valve that the PA represents, which prevents the people from taking to the streets in mass protest. Thus far, the Palestinian public has refrained from rioting, in part because it fears the price they would pay and also because the PA has adopted policies that oppose and thwart this.
- The emergence of East Jerusalem as a focal point of friction and attempted attacks by Palestinian residents who seek to express solidarity with the Gaza Strip and areas of conflict in the West Bank.
- Greater investment in effort and resources by the Israeli security establishment in order to maintaining security cooperation.
- Unrest among Israel's Arab citizens, who identify as Palestinian and until now, have refrained from protesting or identifying with their compatriots on the other side of the Green Line. They, too, could engage in mass protests and play into the hands of Hamas and the axis of resistance, which are keen to expand the arenas of conflict within Israel itself.

What Happens if the Palestinian Authority Collapses or Is Unable to Function?

The PA would not declare its own demise. The tensions that exist between Israel and the United States and the rest of the international community in this context would help it survive. But, as the ruling body, it would have to deal with the serious challenges that reality presents it. On the bilateral, regional, and international fronts, the collapse of the PA, or its inability to function, would have far-reaching and profound ramifications:

- The PLO and the PA would be forced to admit to their domestic rivals as well as to the Arab states who support a peaceful resolution of the conflict, that the path of diplomacy has failed. That would mark the "official" end of the age of the Oslo Accords.
- Hamas and the other Islamic organizations in the region would become prominent alternatives to the existing regime.

- A huge question mark would hang over the strategy of peaceful negotiations that has characterized Israel's relations with those Middle Eastern countries seeking normalization and for whom the resolution of the Palestinian conflict is the key pillar on which this strategy relies.
- In the absence of an alternative to the PLO and the PA in a leadership role, the international community could disavow itself of whatever situation emerges after the collapse.
- Under these conditions, Israel would be forced to take responsibility for running the civilian affairs of Palestinian towns and cities, which over the past 30 years were under Palestinian control. The budgetary burden would be immense.
- The economic burden on Israel would grow. Inter alia, Israel would have to take on the Palestinian Authority's debts and/or unwillingness of international financial institutions to grant it credit.
- Iran's war of attrition against Israel, which is being waged on several fronts through its proxies, would intensify and fronts that are currently quiet would become combat zones.

The Security Perspective

The collapse of the Palestinian Authority would create many challenges for Israel, the most testing of which would be security. For many years, Israel and the Palestinian Authority have coordinated on a reasonable level over security matters, even during times of crisis and when relations between the two sides were at an all-time low. This is because they both recognized that it is a fundamental shared interest. Abu Mazen often described security coordination as sacrosanct. Therefore, the collapse of the Palestinian Authority, or its inability to function, would force Israel to answer some extremely difficult questions:

- What would happen to the Palestinian security forces? How could Israel dismantle a body that is loyal to the PA, committed to agreements with Israel, cooperates with the IDF and is held in high esteem by its Israeli counterparts?
- Would it even be possible to collect weapons from 45,000 members of the Palestinian security forces in the West Bank? How would they be located? It is possible that some of them will hand over their weapons to Israel or a third party, given that they understand the imbalance between the respective military forces, which would be evident in the case of any

confrontation between them, but what about those Palestinian security members who refuse to hand over their weapons?

- How would Israel deal with the risk that members of the Palestinian security forces join terrorist organizations—a danger that is much more real than at any time in the past?
- How would Israel ensure the security of the settlements, many of which have been built in recent years in the heart of the populated Palestinian territories? How would the IDF protect the roads, the border with Jordan, and the seam zone between the West Bank and Israel itself?
- How would Israel deal with the ongoing weakening of the regime in Jordan and with arms smuggling from Iraq and Syria via Jordan to the West Bank, given the increasing inability of the Jordanian security services to prevent them, while, at the same time, dealing with Iranian subversion and the Islamic Republic's efforts to infiltrate Jordan with Shiite fighters? There is a danger that the Israel–Jordan border would go from one of cooperation and peaceful relations to a warzone.
- How would Israel cope if Tel Aviv and the center of the country—home to the vast majority of the population and which, despite the conflict in the north and in the south, have thus far remained relatively quiet—are dragged into the escalation because of the potential collapse of the PA?
- What would be the ramifications of these challenges on Israel's national resilience and the ability of the Israeli public to cope if the economic burden increases and the security situation deteriorates?
- How would Israel ensure that violence does not erupt in East Jerusalem over the issue of the al-Aqsa Mosque, a traditional flashpoint during times of crisis?
- Would Israel's Arab/Palestinian citizens refrain from protesting or demonstrating their support of their compatriots on the other side of the Green Line, and would there be riots in the mixed Jewish–Arab cities?

Recommendations

The collapse of the PA would not only be a bilateral issue between Jerusalem and Ramallah; rather, it would also be a regional and international problem. The leading Arab states and most of the Western powers are involved in diplomatic processes designed to advance an Israeli–Palestinian peace accord. Although the

Oslo Accords failed to lay the groundwork for talks on a final-status solution, they are still considered the framework that ensures relative stability and prevents deterioration. They are a kind of default mode given the impasse that the process reached in 2009.

It is still not too late to renew efforts to bolster the PA and to turn it into a body that is responsible, stable, fully functioning, and committed to the path of agreements, and then to judge it based on the civilian and security benefits it provides and those required of it. It is important to remember:

- The PA is one of the most active fronts in the Middle East when it comes to the struggle between Arab nationalism and Islamism. Friction with Israel, which is at the heart of the dispute between the sides, will give the winning side a significant advantage in the pan-Arab arena. Israel, which wants to be part of a regional coalition alongside the moderate Arab states, must act to ensure that Fatah takes a leading role on the Palestinian front, rather than any organization associated with the Iranian-led axis of resistance. Victory for the PA and dismantling Hamas's military power is a key part of this struggle, as many eyes in the Arab world and the West look on with expectation.
- The Iranian-led axis of resistance, which includes Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamist organizations, is also investing heavily in this struggle and is well aware of the benefits that the collapse of the PA would grant it.
- Israeli democracy, despite the current struggle between the conservative and liberal camps, is still seen as a role model among the Palestinians, many residents of the Gulf states, and elsewhere. Strengthening the PA and encouraging its democracy could contribute to Israel's maintaining this image.

The collapse of the PA would have negative ramifications for Israel on the domestic, regional, and international fronts. It is to be avoided, especially given the ongoing war against Hamas and the axis of resistance led by Iran and Hezbollah. Israel should focus its efforts on dismantling and removing the threat posed by Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Israel should refrain from any measures that weaken the Palestinian Authority to the point that it collapses or is unable to function. This will be Israel's entry ticket into the regional defense-economic coalition that the United States is forming and could forge a new path to the resolution of Israel's conflict with moderate Palestinians.