

The Palestinian Authority's Attempt to Resolve Its Rivalry with Hamas

Yohanan Tzoreff | No. 1961 | March 18, 2025

The growing criticism of Hamas following the October 7 massacre and the significant damage it has caused to the Palestinian cause are pushing the debate between Hamas and Fatah toward a resolution. Abu Mazen is taking advantage of the situation and attempting to accelerate reforms that he previously rejected, in order to prevent the “elimination” of the Palestinian issue—meaning its removal from the agenda—and to shape what will happen the day after. The Arab states that seek a settlement and strive for dialogue with the West see eye to eye with him on these developments. They hope for the departure of Hamas and its armed militias from the Gaza Strip and oppose Trump’s migration plan. There are signs of positive momentum generated in the region due to the war, which Israel can leverage to its advantage—facilitating the release of hostages and, through a determined diplomatic effort, strengthening its security and regional standing.

The increasing waves of criticism of Hamas in Arab and Palestinian media, as well as from rivals, commentators, and conflict researchers in the Arab world, have put the organization on the defensive and deepened internal divisions. These divisions exist between those who were aware of and involved in planning the October 7 attack and those who were forced to justify it retroactively. In recent months, Hamas has also faced challenges posed by the Trump administration and the Israeli government, including the idea of the “voluntary migration” of Gaza residents, the expulsion of Hamas from the Strip, and the prevention of the Palestinian Authority’s return. As a result, the “Palestinian issue” now faces a severe threat—one it has never encountered before—putting at risk all the achievements that the PLO accumulated over the years. Against this backdrop, criticism of Hamas has intensified, portraying it as an organization of ignorant individuals who fail to grasp the rules of the international system and disregard the balance of power, which is clearly tilted in favor of Israel and its allies. Khaled Hroub, a Jordanian of Palestinian descent from a refugee family originally from the Bethlehem area, and a researcher of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with close ties to Hamas, argues that in the past two centuries, no resistance movement against occupation has faced waves of criticism as severe as those directed at the Gaza resistance groups and their leaders since the outbreak of war on October 7, 2023.

This war, its course, and its outcomes appear to be pushing the long-standing debate between Fatah and Hamas toward a decisive moment regarding how to confront Israel’s presence in the region. At the same time, it is also intensifying the historical debate within the Arab world between the nationalist camp—which seeks to develop society, break free from the constraints of religion and tradition, and engage with the West and its culture—and the

conservative Islamic camp, which fears the loss of identity and values that these societies are built upon.

Abu Mazen, who had frequently condemned and criticized Hamas' terror attacks and those of other opposition groups before October 7, did not condemn this latest attack. He and his associates witnessed the widespread support it garnered in the streets of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in the initial months following the attack. In their profound weakness, they hesitated to publicly express the anger they felt toward Hamas and its actions. Nevertheless, Nabil Abu Rudeineh, Abu Mazen's closest media advisor, described the war in its early months as "Hamas' war, not the Palestinian people's war." With this, he sought to distance the Palestinian Authority from Hamas' actions and contrast them with its own approach—avoiding violent struggle. Later, Abu Mazen openly blamed Hamas for the destruction of Gaza, for provoking Israel, and for providing it with the justification to act against the Strip and its residents. Indeed, as the scale of Palestinian casualties and destruction in Gaza becomes clearer, criticism of Hamas is growing within Palestinian circles and in Arab media outlets that extensively cover the war and its consequences. The tone of these critiques has become sharper and more assertive, and the demand for Hamas to admit its failure and leave the Gaza Strip has become increasingly forceful and vocal.

In the Palestinian arena, the rivalry between the nationalist and religious camps is particularly intense, as the constant friction with Israel demands confrontation, taking a stance, and making critical decisions. In its early proclamations and in its charter, published a few months after its establishment in 1988, Hamas adopted a condescending tone, accusing Fatah and the PLO of defeatism. It claimed that their drift away from Islamic values had weakened them and warned against the changes they were introducing in their approach toward Israel. The schism between these two factions, which emerged during the First Intifada, has only deepened over time. From the outset, Hamas' efforts to sabotage the implementation of the Oslo Accords were well-organized, deliberate, and effective. These efforts embarrassed the Palestinian Authority and bolstered Israeli opposition to the agreements.

The division between the two factions, which took on a geographical dimension following the 2006 elections and Hamas' violent takeover of Gaza in 2007, runs deep. It permeates every household and family within Palestinian society, creating a vast rift that has become a defining element of both factions' identities. Unlike Yasser Arafat, Abu Mazen has engaged in a public, candid, and uncompromising debate with Hamas, calling on it to learn from Fatah's experience and making it clear that armed struggle against Israel has effectively failed. Among the most prominent criticisms voiced by Hamas's rivals are:

- **Hamas does not learn from the experience of others** and gambles with Palestinian lives and the future of the Palestinian cause.
- **Hamas does not understand regional and international dynamics**, refusing to acknowledge the massive power disparity that favors Israel and its Western allies.
- **Hamas misunderstands the purpose of resistance to occupation**—such resistance should end the moment the occupying power agrees to negotiations.

- **What is the point of going to war, only to demand a return to the status quo that preceded it?** Is that not an admission of failure?
- **Hamas has deviated from its nature as a resistance movement** against occupation by launching a war against Israel. Its offensive was characteristic of a national army, an act driven by arrogance and hubris.
- **The kidnapping of civilians, including women and children, was a grave and immoral act**—Hamas should have returned them to Israel immediately and unconditionally.
- **The consequences of the war are so severe that Hamas must admit defeat**, withdraw its armed forces from Gaza, and allow capable leadership to take control of the region.

During the long-standing debate between the nationalist and religious factions, Hamas has repeatedly accused Abu Mazen of delegitimizing resistance to the “Israeli occupation” on the global stage. According to Hamas, he has contributed to the definition of “resistance” groups as terrorist organizations in the international arena and has positioned political negotiations as the sole legitimate path to resolving the conflict with Israel. However, nearly a year and a half after the October 7 attack, the extent of Hamas’ failure—along with that of other “resistance” factions—to advance the Palestinian people’s goal of political independence has become evident. The Palestinian Authority and Arab states that oppose Hamas no longer accept the *Sumud* (steadfastness) culture, which equates mere survival of the “resistance” movement with victory.

In this context, Abu Mazen has begun taking steps in recent months to assert power and presence while implementing long-delayed reforms—moves he had previously avoided due to his weakened position and fears that they would be seen as yielding to external pressure that could undermine the Palestinian Authority’s decision-making independence. Among these measures:

- **A mechanism for presidential succession was established** in case of incapacitation. In a decree issued in November 2024, Abu Mazen ruled that in such a scenario, the presidency would temporarily transfer to the Chairman of the Palestinian National Council, who would be required to hold presidential elections within 90 days. If elections could not be held within the initial timeframe, a single extension of the same duration would be allowed.
- **The Palestinian Authority’s security forces were instructed to act against armed militants in the refugee camps of the northern West Bank**—a move previously avoided due to the Authority’s weakness and the popular support for Hamas. From early December 2024, these forces operated in the Jenin refugee camp against the Jenin Battalion and other armed groups. The operation ended with an agreement with the militants but did not include disarmament. Ultimately, it was interrupted by Israeli military actions, as the IDF preferred to take matters into its own hands. Nevertheless, the Palestinian security forces managed to confine the militants to the camp, preventing them from launching attacks against settlers and soldiers, and continued pursuing them even as IDF operations were ongoing.

- **A general amnesty was announced for individuals expelled from Fatah**, implicitly including Mohammed Dahlan and his many supporters.
- **Abu Mazen declared his intention to appoint a deputy chairman for the PLO**, a step he had long resisted despite mounting pressure.
- **At the Arab League Summit in Cairo on March 4, 2025, Abu Mazen announced plans to rejuvenate leadership** within the Palestinian Authority and the PLO, as well as within all of their governing bodies. He also expressed his willingness to hold elections within a year.

These recent moves have repositioned Abu Mazen alongside the Sunni Arab states, which had been critical of him in recent years. Furthermore, he has embraced Egypt's plan for Gaza's reconstruction—endorsed by the Arab League—arguing that it aligns well with his broader strategy to restore Palestinian Authority (PA) control over the Gaza Strip. In his speech at the Arab League Summit, Abu Mazen declared that the PA is ready to resume responsibility for governing Gaza without Hamas' involvement. He emphasized that Hamas' rejection of the principle of "one weapon, one law"—a core tenet of PA governance—is the primary obstacle to fulfilling the will of the Palestinian people, who have long demanded national reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah.

The war that erupted on October 7, 2023, has generated new regional and international dynamics. More than 17 months into the conflict, Israel has reshaped the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. The axis of resistance—led by Iran and its proxies—has been severely weakened, while the internal Palestinian debate appears to be nearing a decisive moment in favor of the nationalist camp, which recognizes Israel and is willing to coexist with it. Disgust with Hamas and outrage over its actions have become dominant sentiments in Arab countries, which now seek to stabilize the region in cooperation with Israel and the United States. From this perspective, the removal of Hamas, particularly its military wing, is seen as a necessary condition for achieving stability. The atrocities of October 7 have provided additional legitimacy to this demand.

As of now, President Trump has shown little public interest in the Palestinian issue. However, Abu Mazen's collaboration with Arab states and his integration into their Gaza reconstruction plan could strengthen his position in dealing with Trump—who significantly weakened the PA during his previous term—if and when Palestinian affairs regain priority on the U.S. agenda.

Israel must capitalize on these regional and international dynamics to form an Israeli-Arab-international coalition, led by the United States, that would condition Gaza's reconstruction on the full demilitarization of the territory and the removal of all armed forces—but only after the release of all Israeli hostages held by Hamas and the additional release of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails. A key prerequisite for advancing this initiative is Israeli agreement to integrate the Palestinian Authority (or an entity acting on its behalf) into the governing body that will manage Gaza. Additionally, the United States would need to abandon its proposal for the "voluntary migration" of Gazan residents.

While it is highly likely that Hamas will reject such a demand, this approach could accelerate the erosion of Hamas' legitimacy and, by extension, enhance the legitimacy of the Palestinian Authority and the nationalist camp within Palestinian politics. If successfully implemented, this strategy could reshape the Palestinian landscape, weaken Hamas' influence, and establish a new governance framework for Gaza under international and regional support.

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