

NORMALIZATION AND THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY

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The normalization agreements signed between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco in 2020, just a few months after the unveiling of then-President Trump's "Deal of the Century," dealt a harsh blow to the Palestinians in general and to the Palestinian Authority in particular. The PLO and the PA had for years based their foreign policy on Arab support, which was considered a given—at least by default—during times of crisis and hardship. The signing of these agreements, the lack of opposition to them, and even the degree of support they received from key Gulf states—foremost among them Saudi Arabia—were perceived by the PA as a retreat from the longstanding commitment to the Palestinian cause. Terms such as “abandonment” and “betrayal” were frequently used by many Palestinian spokespersons. At an Arab League summit held after the agreements were signed, and at the request of the PLO, Saeb Erekat—who was in charge of the negotiations with Israel—accused the representatives of Arab states of undermining Arab solidarity by disregarding the Arab Peace Initiative, which stipulates that the Arab world would recognize Israel only after it withdraws from the occupied territories and a Palestinian state is established in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. This initiative was formulated and defined as the official Arab position for resolving the Israeli-Arab conflict and was endorsed by all Islamic countries at the 2007 Islamic Conference.

Thus, the Abraham Accords exacerbated the weakness of the Palestinian Authority, intensified internal criticism of PA Chairman Mahmoud Abbas, accelerated the loss of legitimacy of both Abbas and the PA in the eyes of the

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public, and compelled him to renew reconciliation efforts with Hamas, the strongest and most threatening rival in the Palestinian arena.

Following the election of Joe Biden as President of the United States in November 2020, Abbas abandoned the reconciliation efforts and returned to the traditional approach of relying on a “fair” American administration—unlike the Trump administration—and favoring a political process over intra-Palestinian reconciliation. However, Biden, who began his presidency in January 2021, found it difficult to restore the parties to a political track similar to the processes that had taken place before the Trump era, due to the instability of the Israeli political system and the unwillingness of successive Israeli governments during those years to engage in a process. Therefore, the Biden administration formulated a regional package, at the center of which was Israeli–Saudi normalization in exchange for Israeli consent to a two-state solution. The guiding rationale of the plan was to provide a response to Israel’s security concerns regarding the threat posed by Hamas and the Axis of Resistance, through a regional front led by the United States, as well as to provide Arab backing for decisions the PA would have to make in the context of a settlement with Israel and in its confrontation with Hamas.

The official Palestinian position, as presented by senior Palestinian authority officials over the past twenty years, is based on the Arab Peace Initiative. Therefore, as long as a Palestinian state is not on the table and there is no Israeli withdrawal from Palestinian territories, the PA absolutely opposes any normalization agreement that is not based on its principles. However, the reality that has existed since the Trump era—and even more so after October 7, 2023—reflects the deep distress the Palestinian Authority is in. It suffers from severe weakness, which hinders its ability to fulfill its responsibilities and obligations in most of the areas under its jurisdiction. Should normalization be realized, it would lose its nearly exclusive support base—the Arab world. This is because the Biden administration has not repaired the damage caused to the PA by the adversarial policies of the Trump administration. Moreover, for

several decades, the PLO and the PA have distanced themselves from other Palestinian resistance organizations, but now claim they are left without leverage. On the one hand, they have renounced armed struggle and are accused by resistance organizations of delegitimizing armed resistance. On the other hand, they face international opposition to the legal and diplomatic struggle they seek to pursue against Israeli control in the West Bank, and are subject to numerous dictates from donor states.

The Palestinian Authority cut ties with the Trump administration over the “Deal of the Century,” which it viewed as pro-Israel and unbalanced. Subsequently, the PA found itself isolated from developments in the Middle East and excluded from contacts with countries that normalized their relations with Israel. However, a key lesson the Palestinians have drawn from this dynamic is that it is unwise to ignore a reality unfolding before their eyes and against their wishes; rather, they must choose the lesser evil and present their demands, in the hope that some will be met.

Therefore, the Palestinian Authority adopted a positive—albeit conditional—approach to the Biden initiative. In a July 2023 meeting in Amman between representatives of Mahmoud Abbas and Barbara Leaf, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, they conditioned the promotion of normalization with Israel on fulfillment of the following demands:

- Transfer of parts of Area C, currently under Israeli control, to Palestinian control.
- A complete halt to the construction of new settlements and/or strengthening and support of existing settlements in the West Bank.
- Renewal of Saudi financial aid to the Palestinian Authority, which was completely halted in 2020 after reductions began in 2016. At its peak, this aid amounted to approximately \$200 million.
- Reopening of the American consulate in East Jerusalem, which was closed during the first Trump administration when the U.S. embassy was moved

from Tel Aviv to West Jerusalem. Biden struggled to fulfill his promise on this issue, in part due to opposition in the U.S. Congress.

- Renewal of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations under American mediation, beginning from the point where talks ended during Secretary of State John Kerry's term (2013–2014).

From the American perspective, these demands are excessive. However, from the PA's standpoint, they are a necessary evil due to its limited room for maneuver and its need to strengthen its internal position. Given statements and signals from Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and other senior Saudis before October 2023, the train may leave the station and once again leave the PA alone, weak, and powerless against Hamas—which, even before October 7, had established an image as a viable governing alternative.

Since October 7, the cards have been reshuffled. Normalization has not been taken off the table, but the ability to realize it is impractical under the conditions of an ongoing war. The Palestinian issue, which Israel and the Saudis regarded before October 7 as little more than lip service to fulfill obligations toward the Palestinians and the international community, has returned to the agenda in a manner where ignoring it might, from an Arab perspective, be seen as an injustice to the Palestinians and a violation of the official Arab position. Therefore, any pursuit of normalization requires the formulation of a broad and complex package that takes into account the new reality in the Israeli–Palestinian arena and the region as a whole, and satisfies, to the extent possible, the interests of the parties involved.

The Palestinian Authority, still shaken by the disaster that Hamas brought upon the residents of the Gaza Strip and on the Palestinian cause, distances itself from Hamas, its actions, and its war. However, it remains passive and hesitant in the face of political initiatives such as the normalization initiative. Its many spokespersons often harshly criticize Hamas in Arab broadcast and print media—particularly those affiliated with moderate states—in part

to undermine public sympathy for Hamas and its image as a “liberation movement.” In addition, Iran is accused of sowing division within Palestinian society and interfering in matters not its own.

An initiative placed on the regional agenda by President Biden included an effort to overcome the obstacle to normalization created by the war and the significant Israeli barriers that have emerged since October 7. The Biden administration formulated a plan to “revive” the Palestinian Authority, which would allow it to become acceptable to Israel, return to representing the Palestinian people, and take responsibility for Gaza the day after the war. This is not merely a matter of improving the Authority’s performance, but also its public image—a move that, in the view of Abbas and his inner circle, may harm their status and force them to relinquish assets. Therefore, they are not enthusiastic about the idea, but lack the power to openly oppose it. For its part, the Israeli government has opposed the PA’s return to power in the Gaza Strip since the war began, and some of its ministers have even openly expressed intentions to reoccupy the Strip and reestablish Israeli settlements there.

As for Saudi Arabia, since October 7, Riyadh’s public commitment to the Palestinian issue has increased, and its spokespersons frequently present Israeli agreement to the establishment of a Palestinian state as a condition for advancing normalization. The Saudi Crown Prince has repeatedly referred to the Arab Peace Initiative and clarified that it is the proper framework for achieving normalization. However, this commitment appears to be waning as the war between Israel and Hamas continues with no end in sight. Saudi interests—foremost among them the desire to establish a defense alliance with the United States—seem to outweigh its interest in promoting a solution to the Palestinian issue. At the same time, the United States is unlikely to give up on the regional package, which includes renewal of the political process for resolving the Palestinian issue, and may instead move forward with a separate agreement with Riyadh.

The Palestinian Authority will determine its position regarding Israeli–Saudi normalization after the war in Gaza, largely guided by the Israeli position on one hand and Hamas’s standing on the other. If Israel continues to oppose including the PA in managing Gaza’s affairs, the United States will struggle to advance the normalization process. And if Hamas retains some of its strength and is seen by parts of the public as a viable alternative, the PA will be unable to return to Gaza—and therefore will also be unable to once again represent all Palestinians in political dialogue. It is likely that growing criticism of Hamas by Palestinian intellectuals and Fatah members, along with rising anger among Gaza’s residents, will help the PA in its efforts to reintegrate into the Strip “the day after.” However, any inter-organizational reconciliation, if achieved, that does not include a change in Hamas’ hold on power—or what remains of it—will make it difficult for the U.S., Israel, and even Saudi Arabia to advance the normalization process.

It seems that the Palestinian Authority is currently placing its hopes in two tracks. The first is continuing the struggle in the international arena to gain more recognition and membership in as many international institutions as possible, in order to establish diplomatic realities that place the Palestinian state in a position from which neither Israel nor the United States can ignore it. This effort involves coordination with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states and relies on their commitment to the establishment of a Palestinian state, which has increased significantly following the war. The second track is political change in the United States and Israel, which could allow for improved communication between the Israeli government and the U.S. administration and possibly greater openness to the Palestinian issue—so that the “revitalized” Palestinian Authority can more easily participate in shaping “the day after” in Gaza and in future discussions, when they begin, on normalization and its implications for the future of the Palestinian cause.