

Israel's Post-Iran War Challenge: The Return of the Palestinian Issue to the International Agenda

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The war between the United States and Israel against Iran and its regional consequences have significantly shifted regional and international attention toward securing global energy sources and supply, curbing Iran, and shaping a new regional balance of power. This comes after many years in which resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was perceived as the key to ensuring regional stability. However, this shift does not necessarily indicate declining interest in the conflict itself, but rather a change in approach: the prolonged absence of a political horizon may create an international preference for enforcing a settlement, rather than ongoing mediation efforts which, thus far, have failed to yield results. From Israel's perspective, the risk lies not only in the ongoing management of a conflict on the brink of flare-up, but also in the loss of control over the terms of its resolution.

For decades, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was perceived as a distinctly international issue, with efforts toward its resolution taking place through mediation, as well as regional and international diplomatic initiatives. Even when such processes failed, the international community's willingness to continue seeking solutions maintained the baseline assumption that the conflict could ultimately be resolved through political negotiations. One example is the Arab Peace Initiative, formulated in 2002 in coordination with the U.S. administration and other international community actors, which sought to overcome the obstacles that had prevented the achievement of a permanent settlement since the implementation of the Oslo Accords began. Similarly, various American initiatives—Annapolis in 2007–2009; Secretary of State John Kerry's initiative, placed on the agenda in 2013–2014; and even President Trump's "Deal of the Century" in 2020, which sought to impose a solution on the Palestinians—were all developed from the premise that some form of mutual agreement was necessary. These initiatives also involved regional partners, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan.

However, against the backdrop of the war with Iran, this approach appears to be eroding. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states are more committed today to resolving the Palestinian issue than they were prior to October 7, yet the recent war with Iran has diminished the status of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the organizing axis of regional processes. Diplomatic and security-related steps often advance without significant Palestinian involvement, and without a recognized Palestinian leadership being perceived as an effective address for managing a political process. Trump's 20-point plan, which focuses on the Gaza Strip, did not refer to the Palestinian Authority as a relevant actor, and did not involve it in its formulation process, regarding it at most as a possible vehicle for implementation. Since the war in Iran and its regional repercussions, the Palestinian issue has not appeared in the headlines as part of an arrangement that will shape the face of the Middle East. Against this backdrop, a gradual realization is emerging: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict cannot be left solely in the hands of the parties directly involved, and a settlement cannot be advanced through mediation. As a result, there is a growing inclination to seek alternative courses of action.

The Erosion of Palestinian Leadership

The actor paying the heaviest price in this reality is the Palestinian Authority, which, since the launching of the Oslo Accords, was intended to serve as the central political address in any settlement process. Today, however, the Palestinian Authority faces profound erosion in both its standing and capabilities. This stems from several cumulative factors: the ongoing intra-Palestinian divide, a loss of hope, the absence of a shared political vision among the Palestinian factions, and a loss of regional—particularly Israeli—confidence in the Palestinian Authority's ability to function effectively and operate as a state. Consequently, political-level engagement with the Authority has been reduced dramatically, while Israel's reliance on force in the ongoing friction across the West Bank has increased. The outcome is a hollowing out of the institution: the Authority continues to exist as an administrative and security framework, but struggles to serve as an entity capable of generating political hope or a credible horizon. Its security mechanisms are perceived by many Palestinians as an instrument serving Israel, rather than their own people.

By contrast, Hamas continues to operate according to an entirely different logic. Although the organization is under intense military, political, and inter-Arab pressure, it has benefited considerably from the vacuum created by the delays in implementing Trump's 20-point plan. In the absence of an alternative entity capable of exercising effective control over the Gaza Strip, Hamas is gaining time—a vital resource from its perspective—and maintaining its ability to survive, reorganize, and rebuild its strength. Hamas has also taken control of humanitarian aid entering the Strip, taxing it in order to secure funding for itself. The prolonged war in Iran, together with the numerous meetings held with Hamas by Nikolay Mladenov, the High Commissioner for the Gaza Strip on behalf of the Peace Council (BOP), have only reinforced the organization's sense of relevance. This allows Hamas to postpone critical decisions without committing to the substantive steps demanded of it: the demilitarization of the Strip, disarmament, and the transfer of governing authority. The fact that both the Iranian regime and Hezbollah have demonstrated resilience following the joint Israeli-American strike on Iran has also signaled to Hamas (and to the rest of the proxies) that the "Axis of Resistance" still exists, along with the hope for reorganization.

The combination of the Palestinian Authority's eroded status, Hamas's survival, and Israel's lack of interest in resolving the conflict with the Palestinians—focusing instead on defeating Palestinian national aspirations—is effectively altering the nature of the conflict. Rather than being framed as a challenge with the prospect of a future settlement, what is taking root is the perpetual management of the conflict, consuming vast international resources, time, and funding without any political framework for resolution.

Israel's Growing International Challenge

At the same time, international criticism of Israel is intensifying due to growing distrust regarding the sincerity of its intentions toward resolving the conflict with the Palestinians. In the United States and other leading Western countries, public opinion is increasingly adopting the Palestinian narrative regarding the reasons for the conflict's continued deadlock, despite the massacre perpetrated by Hamas on October 7. The numerous and severe assaults against Palestinian residents of the West Bank by Jewish extremists and settlers—including assaults on both persons and property—are further fueling anti-Israel sentiment abroad. The attacks carried out by Jews against Palestinians in the West Bank have also strongly reinforced the increasingly widespread perception in the West that Israel is working toward the extension of sovereignty over Judea and Samaria, and that the "Decisive Plan" presented by Minister Bezalel Smotrich is effectively being adopted by most government ministers. In the Arab world, there is also growing concern, even more pronounced than in the past, that Israel seeks to redraw its borders in accordance with the concept of a "Greater Israel." As one senior Arab commentator put it: "Israel is not interested in normalization (*tatbi'* تطبيع) but in imposing its authority over the region (*tatwi'* تطويع)."

As this trend expands, it will form a baseline for public and political legitimacy in the international arena for more forceful measures toward Israel. The continuation of the conflict in its current form, together with the unwillingness or inability of both sides—Israeli and Palestinian alike—to advance its resolution, undermines the assumption that formulating a settlement remain in their hands. It is doubtful that, following the war in Iran, President Trump will be able to continue ignoring the calls from the American public, from the Arab states (whose commitment to the Palestinian cause has intensified following the war), and from European countries (whose cooperation he needs in order to implement his plans in the Gaza Strip), demanding a firmer stance toward Israel. This may reinforce the understanding within the international system that a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must be advanced—even if it runs contrary to the aspirations of both sides.

Implications for Israel's National Security

The continuation of the political deadlock, together with the belief that has strengthened among many Israelis since October 7—namely, that security can be established through prolonged control over another people, and that any political process involving territorial compromise must be opposed—may, in the aftermath of the war in Iran, present Israel with challenges on three levels, all of which affect its national security:

- **On the domestic level:** A deepening of the fundamental rifts within Israeli society, large segments of which view the failure to resolve the Palestinian issue as undermining both their democratic way of life and the democratic character of the state.

- **On the diplomatic level:** An intensification of international criticism and the placing of responsibility for the unresolved conflict on Israel.
- **On the security level:** Widespread, decentralized, and unorganized violence that will gradually flood the West Bank and beyond.

Summary and Recommendations

Under Israel's current political conditions, some of the steps required to curb the dangers inherent in the ongoing political deadlock, foremost among them the reopening of a political process, are not feasible. However, this should not lead to the conclusion that inaction is a realistic option for Israel. On the contrary. Avoiding measures aimed at strengthening Palestinian governance, preventing a vacuum in the Palestinian arena, and preserving regional and international involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian arena will only intensify the threat. Therefore, even without a shift in Israel's political landscape, the country faces a clear choice—not between a solution and a settlement, but between halting the deterioration or deepening it. Consequently, Israel should consider the following measures:

- Economic collapse of the Palestinian Authority must be prevented, security coordination with the Palestinian security mechanisms must be maintained, and economic relief should be provided for the Palestinian public.
- The idea of striving for peace, which has been an integral part of Israel's national security doctrine since the establishment of the state and has yielded significant diplomatic achievements with tangible security benefits lasting for decades, should be reembraced.
- A distinction must be made between Hamas—a radical and rogue religious movement—and the Palestinian Authority, which remains a legitimate and pragmatic address with which political arrangements can be formulated, so as not to push the entire Palestinian system in a more radical direction. The current political deadlock could ultimately lead to a renewed unification of the Palestinian arena between Fatah and Hamas, leaving no functioning and moderate Palestinian counterpart with whom political coordination and dialogue can be maintained.
- Contacts and cooperation with Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf states should be intensified in order to expand their involvement in improving the functioning of the Palestinian Authority. These efforts should also support the implementation of a framework that includes the transfer of control over the Gaza Strip to the Palestinian Authority, as a central step toward stabilizing the arena after a war that has lasted nearly three years.

When the war with Iran ends, the Palestinian issue is expected to return to the center of the regional and international agenda. However, this time, it may appear in a different context than in the past: no longer as an arena of prolonged mediation, but as an issue requiring intervention. In such a situation, the international community, the Arab nations with which Israel seeks normalization—and perhaps even the United States—may no longer accept the continued management of a prolonged conflict, and instead turn to measures of pressure and even the imposition of a settlement. From Israel's perspective, this would mean losing the ability to shape the terms under which the conflict is resolved.

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