



The Day After Mahmoud Abbas

An analysis of Israeli options in the Palestinian arena

Israel should continue to manage the conflict and advance Palestinian autonomy until the Palestinian Authority is ready to sign an agreement that will satisfy Israeli interests.

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Introduction

The Palestinian Authority (PA) under Mahmoud Abbas' leadership has recently issued blunt statements, clearly demonstrating Palestinian resistance to the Trump administration's peace initiative – the so-called “deal of the century.” The PA is very likely to reject the diplomatic plan that the US and Arab countries in the region have been drafting.

Abbas stubbornly refuses to meet with the US president's delegates to the region. Abbas' spokesman, Nabil Abu Rudeineh, recently declared the administration's efforts to broker an agreement a “waste of time.”¹ Another senior member of the PA, Saeb Erekat, said that “this entire [American] administration is biased in Israel's favor,” and that “their peace program will fail.”²

The PA president's continued recalcitrance, his advanced age of 83, and ill health³ have prompted speculations about Abbas' successor and the PA's future. However, the most significant question at hand is not who the next PA chairman will be, but what Israeli policy will be on the day after Abbas.

This paper begins with an overview of the PA's failure in state-building. It then explores the possible aftermath once Abbas is gone. It concludes with the recommendation that Israel continue managing the conflict and advancing Palestinian autonomy until the PA is ready to sign an agreement that will satisfy Israeli interests.

The PA's Failure at State Building

Since its founding pursuant to the 1994 Oslo Accords, the PA has never succeeded moving beyond the interim phase of an autonomous sub-state actor to becoming a state actor, capable of managing its territory and population without outside aid. The PA has completely failed to maintain its economy, to manage its foreign and domestic policies, and to govern.

Yasser Arafat, the PA's first president who led until 2004, left behind anarchy, diplomatic stagnation, terror, a destroyed economy, and a poor, hungry society. At the time of his death, the PA's debts were estimated at approximately USD 900 million, constituting 53.25% of its budget. Most PA residents lived below the poverty line, almost half were unemployed, and thousands were on the verge of starvation.⁴

Arafat allowed many state apparatuses to coexist, mainly those charged with maintaining security. By keeping them compartmentalized, he prevented any single one from becoming powerful enough to threaten his absolute rule and his tight control of the PA's resources.⁵

After replacing Arafat, Mahmoud Abbas officially renounced terror as a policy,⁶ recognizing the need to obtain legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. He began focusing on state building and improving the Palestinian economy, but the PA has largely remained a failed state entity.

Despite more than two decades of donations, loans, and aid that the PA has received from the international community, the PA's infrastructures still do not sustain fully functioning and adequate state institutions. Its hobbled justice system cannot contend with the rampant corruption, its tax-collection mechanisms are inefficient, its physical infrastructures are failing, the economy is unviable, and unemployment is high.⁷ The PA has not even been able to maintain exclusive control over the use of force.⁸

Economic failure

In a 2014 report, the Knesset's Center for Information and Research showed that the PA's debt grew from USD 0.5 billion in 2008 to USD 1.4 billion in 2012. To make matters worse, the PA's economy is almost totally dependent on donations it receives from the world. In 2014, free financial aid from Arab and European states constituted almost half its expense budget (42.1%), which was approximately NIS 14 billion.⁹ As of 2014, the PA's budget deficit was approximately NIS 5 billion, which constituted approximately a third of its budget. Wages paid to the PA's employees, which amounted to 52.5% of the PA's expense budget,¹⁰ were the main cause of the deficit.

The EU's European Court of Auditors published a report in 2013 warning that the contribution monies were not used properly to promote reforms in the PA in the spheres of education and health, and mainly in the public service.¹¹ The report also stressed that the PA paid tens of thousands of salaries to its former officials who lived in the Gaza Strip and did no work at all.¹²

The PA's production power mainly lies in agriculture and industry, which have not grown in real terms for more than a decade. Though several important service branches such as tourism, communications, and information technology attained relatively high growth rates, their percentage of the GDP remains marginal. Almost all the economic growth is in commerce, services, and housing construction, due to the greatly increased private and public consumption that is funded by foreign aid.¹³

One of the people who did bring about a modicum of change was Salam Fayyad, the PA's former prime minister and finance minister. Under Fayyad's tutelage, efforts

were made to create state institutions and train the security forces, as well as strengthening the rule of law and the law enforcement and tax-collection agencies.

In August 2009, Fayyad disseminated a five-year plan for the period from 2008 to 2013 that focused on developing state institutions in the social, economic, and political spheres.¹⁴ However, Fayyad quit his post in April 2013 due to disagreements with Abbas and tensions between the two. The PA's and Fatah's senior members were outraged with Fayyad's war on corruption and his tight control of the Palestinian finance ministry's coffers.¹⁵

Corruption

The EU's report on corruption in the PA points to patterns that have existed since its very inception. Among other examples found, the report states that USD 2 billion disappeared from the aid money delivered to the PA and the Gaza Strip between 2008 and 2012. The report also noted that senior PA and Fatah officials skimmed large sums of money from aid funds, and personnel in the Palestinian security apparatuses took aid money to invest in their personal businesses.¹⁶

In a 2017 report about a nongovernmental Palestinian organization that fights corruption, government positions were found to be in high demand. Apart from the fact that the private sector is weak, government hiring practices are not transparent, and there is disregard for competition between candidates or their qualifications. Public figures in the PA enjoy illegal tax and customs benefits, and the higher-ups who belong to the security apparatus earn inflated salaries. The report also states that the PA spends money on financial entities that no longer exist, such as for the salaries of hundreds of workers of a defunct government airline.¹⁷

Sovereignty and Lack of Law and Order

The PA's various security forces are still unable to uphold its rule throughout all the territories. Hamas and other terror organizations use some of the refugee camps for training and other activities, without any opposition on the PA's part.¹⁸

Further evidence that the PA's security forces are ineffectual is the 2014 report of Hamas' failed coup attempt in Judea and Samaria, which the General Security Service intercepted. During the operation, 94 militants were arrested, and numerous firearms and vast sums of money were uncovered. The insurgency was mostly concentrated near Ramallah, but the network for recruiting terrorists reached all the Palestinian cities in Judea and Samaria, including the Jerusalem region. If Israel had not acted in time, Hamas might have seized control of these regions, just as it seized control of the Gaza Strip, and turned them into additional terror bases against Israel.¹⁹

Lack of governance

Hamas' violent coup against the Fatah in the Gaza Strip after Israel's withdrawal hastened the PA's disintegration. The territorial split was followed by social, economic, and political divisions as well. The PA effectively demonstrated that it is not willing or is incapable of ruling. In fact, the PA governs itself in Judea and Samaria at the mercy of Israel's security forces.

The split between the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip and the PA-controlled Judea and Samaria territories undermined the PA's status as the Palestinians' sole representative. According to the Oslo agreements, the PA alone is responsible for Palestinian security. But the PA's innate inability to build a state grew even more apparent after the Hamas' takeover of the Gaza Strip.

Deep rifts in society

The split between the Gaza Strip and the PA reflects not only political but also deep societal rifts stemming from a wide ideological chasm. The two states are separate and distinct entities, locked in conflict with each other. The only glue that still holds them together is their hatred for Israel; their highest aspiration is to destroy the State of Israel.

There are differences, of course. The PA exhibits a certain measure of flexibility, even if it is only tactical; it strives toward establishing a separate independent state and negotiates possible solutions for ending the conflict with Israel. By contrast, Hamas still deploys terror against Israel and is unwilling to recognize the State of Israel or negotiate with it. These differences attest to the absence of national consensus and cohesion.

PA Policy vis-à-vis Israel in the Abbas Era

After Yasser Arafat's death and Abbas's rise to power, the PA switched its tactics to a policy that was mainly characterized as "nonviolent resistance."²⁰ This has included hurling rocks at Jews, knife stabbings, vehicular attacks, violent disruptions of the peace, use of Molotov cocktails, fireworks, and other means of terror. In addition, "classic" terror attacks continued too, involving drive-by shootings and shootings in the heart of Israeli cities.

Over the years, Abbas turned down every US and Israeli peace proposal. Abbas' "policy of recalcitrance" proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that like Arafat before him, he is not interested in resolving the Israeli-Arab conflict. Rather, he views the State of Israel's existence as a problem or obstacle.

Abbas' actions or lack thereof during his long tenure further support the claim that Abbas' aim is not peace. First and foremost is his incentivization of terror with the "pay for slay" scheme, and his unwillingness to end institutional incitement against the State of Israel.²¹

Thus, for example, the PA allocated NIS 550 million of the 2018 budget for the salaries of terrorists in prison and ones who had been released. Another NIS 687 million was allocated for the family members of *shahids* (martyrs)²² and to wounded terrorists.²³ These payments give incentive to others to commit additional terror acts, especially when these generous stipends are compared to average salaries in the PA and given the generally dismal economic situation there.²⁴

Ever since the US recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital, the PA's official television and radio stations have been repeatedly broadcasting²⁵ a clip set to music that features Abbas inciting people to kill Israelis. This same clip had been repeatedly broadcast before to encourage Palestinians to perpetrate terror attacks against

Israel.²⁶ In November 2017, Palestinian television played a song promising “to break the Jews” while displaying a large photo of the female terrorist responsible for the murder of 37 Israelis, including 12 children, in 1978.²⁷ The PA also names town squares²⁸ and children’s summer camps²⁹ after terrorists.

By inciting Palestinians when speaking to them directly, Abbas fanned the fires of opposition from within. When addressing the world, however, he took care to speak as befitting an honored guest who was welcomed into the most distinguished homes abroad.

Abbas has recently dropped the diplomatic veneer that he tried to keep up over the years, out of despair that his policies vis-à-vis the world have failed. Now he and those in his government have started using vitriolic anti-Semitic motifs in their attacks on President Donald Trump and officials in his administration.³⁰

The Day after Abbas

The prevailing opinion is that Abbas’ replacement will not be shaking up the Palestinian leadership by introducing significant changes. The new president is likely to adhere to the same failed policies that the Palestinian leadership has been practicing for years in Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip. The generation of the PA’s core leadership that Abbas also belongs to is deeply rooted in a culture of corruption. It is doubtful that the Palestinian political elite will recognize the deposed Salam Fayyad as a legitimate leader whom they will accept as their new president.

Neither does a major change in the PA’s policy toward Israel appear in sight. Both the cadre of senior leaders and the ones several decades younger were raised on the deep-seated hatred of Israel, shared by the PLO and other “resistance organizations.”

Despite covert collaboration between Israel and the PA, particularly its security forces, inciting to terror is still ingrained in the PA’s institutions and it affects every sphere of society. This being the case, it is unlikely that any Palestinian leader in the next few decades will succeed in building and maintaining a state with functioning political, social, and financial institutions. It is even more unlikely that the next Palestinian leader will be inclined to making any political compromises or to recognize Israel as the national homeland of the Jewish people.

The New Pro-Israel Agenda Poses Challenges for the PA

Abbas’ departure from the Palestinian public arena is only a matter of time, and it comes at a difficult political juncture for the PA. In recent years, there has been a significant strategic shift in Israel’s favor. The so-called Palestinian problem has been sidelined by a series of historical processes. While some of these processes are still difficult to assess, they clearly show a dramatic change of direction.

1. The Arab Spring and its aftermath – as a result of the civil wars that erupted in Arab countries, they shifted their attention from the Palestinian problem to their own social, economic, and security issues. The rest of the world likewise

turned its attention to these divided countries and to the many crimes being committed in them, and away from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

2. Growing presence of radical Islam in Arab, as well as Western, countries – the growth of the Islamic State (IS) spurred Egypt and Jordan to concentrate on stabilizing the security in their own areas. Both share borders with Israel, and thanks to Israel's superior warfare and intelligence capabilities, they cooperate tightly with Israel on security matters. The IS has carried out attacks against the West too and has lessened its preoccupation with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
3. Rise of the Iranian threat – the interests of a number of countries in the region are united by the common Iranian threat: Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf States, as well as Egypt and Iran's nuclear program and its deepening influence in the Middle East threatens them all. The need for tight behind-the-scenes cooperation against Iran outstrips their interest in the Palestinian issue.³¹
4. President Trump's election – Trump's administration veered sharply from Obama's policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Trump recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and moved the US embassy there, while Obama had almost always backed Palestinian interests. The PA, which had grown accustomed to receiving perks of all kinds in order to induce them to sit at the negotiating table, has suddenly found itself at an impasse that it is hard-pressed to extricate itself from.

Trump's administration has also made it clear to the Palestinians that time is on Israel's side, not theirs. Each refusal on the part of the PA earns Israel another perk. Rewarding Israel signals to Abbas and his friends that it is to their advantage to take part in the US initiative for resolving the conflict, regardless of how problematic it is for them, lest their political position continue to worsen.

Possible Scenarios

For many reasons, it is unlikelier than ever that the two-state solution based on the 1967 borders can be implemented. For example, the split between the Gaza Strip and Judea and Samaria; the PA's failure to establish itself politically and its leaders' refusal to seek peace; the new geo-strategic environment that favors Israel; and increased Jewish settlement. Nonetheless, the international community still considers the two-state solution an option.

A one-state solution is undesirable for Israel for national, demographic, and security reasons. Which leaves Israel with four main options: (1) bring down the PA and give the clans and tribes in Judea and Samaria the right to self-rule; (2) preserve and deepen Palestinian autonomy, (3) continue to manage the conflict, and (4) implement a two-state solution under US aegis.

1. Bringing down the PA

Though the phrase "bringing down" denotes an active Israeli role, it is altogether possible that the PA will fall on its own because of its failure politically and its many

ills. The advantages to Israel if the PA were to collapse are many, including: strengthening tribalism among the Palestinians, which is a less oppositional and more opportunistic force, and curbing Palestinians' national aspirations.

The drawback, however, is the possibility that numerous militias will sprout up and that chaos will break out. The IDF (Israel Defense Force) would then have to deepen its presence in additional areas, which would divert resources and forces to regions that have been relatively quiet.

It is also assumed that if the PA is dismantled, Israel may face heavy international pressure and even a series of UN Security Council resolutions forcing it to make decisions that run counter to its own interests. These resolutions may be accompanied by other economic sanctions against the State of Israel.

If the PA continues to fail as a state and the Arabs continue to refuse every solution, Israel may choose the option of bringing down the PA. If it does, it must advise the present US administration, the staunchest one Israel has ever known, and coordinate with them. No other administration will be as likely to support Israel, given certain provisions, in an international court of law and in the UN Security Council. Thus, it would be wise to take advantage of this window of opportunity.

2. The demilitarized state solution (autonomy)

The second option is a demilitarized state or Palestinian autonomy in the currently PA-controlled areas of Judea and Samaria, with the prospect of some willingness on Israel's part to expand them. In this scenario, the Palestinians would enjoy self-rule of their economy, society, and internal security, and they could choose a capital city other than Jerusalem. The Palestinian autonomy would be surrounded by an Israeli security ring to prevent refugees and militants from streaming into Judea and Samaria. Israel would also control the Jordan Valley. The Palestinian security apparatuses and Israeli armed forces would continue coordinating with one another. This arrangement would enable Israel to economize on its expenditure of resources.

It is unlikely the new Palestinian leadership will readily accept this plan, due to the variety of considerations mentioned earlier. However in recent decades and especially since Netanyahu has been prime minister, Israel's strength and prosperity have grown, and the settlement in Judea and Samaria has expanded. The complete reverse is true of the PA. Israel can try to induce the PA to agree by continuing to manage the conflict and by exacting a price from the PA. Eventually the PA might recognize that the more time passes, the more it stands to lose. The PA would then hopefully decide to cut its losses and accept the autonomy plan in the long future.

3. Continuing to manage the conflict

The advantage to managing the conflict is that it maintains the status quo. By avoiding wide-scale changes that will introduce new variables, Israel can likewise avoid having to contend with unforeseeable results. In this scenario, the PA would remain an autonomous state entity, with a central authority responsible for the political rights, security, welfare, and economy of the Arab residents of Judea and Samaria. However, they would not have the option of increasing the area of the

Palestinian-controlled territories or their foreign diplomatic and economic ties with the world.

Israel would be able to continue implementing its routine security measures in the PA territories and avoid having to increase them. Israel could allocate its military and security resources for more important, burning arenas.

At the same time, Israel could continue expanding the settlements mainly in what is known as “Area C,” which is already under Israeli security and civilian control. By thus creating facts on the ground, Israel will be able to strengthen its hold on strategically important settlements and contain the size of a future Palestinian entity. Deepening the reach of Israeli settlements could turn into a bargaining-chip and be used to pressure Palestinians into becoming less recalcitrant. The PA will come to understand that the more they put off negotiations, the smaller their future land, be it an autonomous entity or a nation-state, will be.

This plan is expedient at the international level as well. Throughout the years, Israel has relied on its strategic alliance with the United States to keep Israel from being humiliated³² and to promote its legal interests within the UN Security Council. Over the last decade, Israel wisely cultivated a reputation for being open to dialogue and ongoing negotiations with the other side. In contrast, the PA has acquired a reputation for being recalcitrant. As long as nothing changes, Israel will probably continue enjoying diplomatic support from the United States.

4. The two-state solution under US auspices

In order for the two-state solution to have a chance, Trump’s administration will probably have to incorporate it in his Middle East peace initiative, which has not yet been finalized. Though Trump’s domestic and foreign policies are less predictable than his predecessors’, his and his senior staff’s ties with Netanyahu are strong. It is possible that the initiative will therefore focus on Palestinian autonomy rather than the two-state solution. Nevertheless, it is well-known that the US State Department has consistently favored the two-state solution over all the other options. But as it is unlikely that the US State Department will change its official position, it is reasonable to assume that Trump’s plan will address the two-state solution as well.

It stands to reason that once the US administration publicizes its plan, the State of Israel will adopt it. The question is whether it will adopt it warmly or reluctantly. The Israeli response will depend, of course, on the details. But the evidence so far indicates that this plan will be the most palatable one the US has ever proposed to Israel.

Even if the plan looks completely different than what can be gleaned from isolated details leaked so far, Israel will be forced to publicly support it. Trump’s unreserved support for Israel and his historic gestures on Israel’s behalf leave it no choice. But even if the plan is not to Israel’s liking, it can always count on Palestinians’ recalcitrance and their blatant hostility to the Trump administration to avoid having to accept it.

It is reasonable to assume that when Abbas’ era is over, the international community, with the US at the head, will try to find a successor whom everyone can

accept, in order to prevent the PA from collapsing. Perhaps the Americans and the international community will begin grooming the new PA leader during the talks even if Abbas is still president. In fact, it is likely that the breaking-in process has already begun behind the scenes.

If a successor has already been found, without advising Israel, the latter will be forced to pay more heed to the wishes of the EU and the US State Department with regard to talks about a two-state solution with the new Palestinian leader.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The PA is a failed state entity that has not succeeded in maintaining adequate social, political, security, and financial institutions. From its inception, the PA has also incited to terror and itself instigated terror against Israel, in violation of the Oslo agreements. It is unlikely that the next PA leader will make sweeping changes in this regard. This does not mean that Israel must sit complacently without trying to turn certain developments to its advantage.

Israel must now join in the US administration's process of vetting the next PA leader. Active but behind-the-scenes Israeli involvement together with US pressure on the Palestinians may well result in a new leader who is more flexible and easier to work with. Even if the leader is not, Israel might at least be able to exercise damage control.

After weighing the advantages and disadvantages of all four options, it seems that Israel's best course for now is to continue advancing a vision of Palestinian autonomy, while at the same time adhering to a conflict-management strategy. With the Trump administration's enthusiastic support for Israel and its willingness and openness to consider options for resolving the conflict, conditions particularly favor Israel. Hopefully, one day the PA will be ready to sign an agreement that will satisfy Israeli interests.

Even if the Trump administration rejects the autonomy plan, given the shared history and the long-standing strategic alliance between Israel and the US it is unlikely that future US administrations will force a one-sided solution on the State of Israel.

To make the peace plan more likely to succeed, it should be offered as part of a package deal to the Saudi-led Arab states. Israel should also stick to the construct that Netanyahu has been advancing in recent years: That Arab recognition of Israel (first) could lead to an agreement with the Palestinians (later).

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