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Palestinian Sovereignty after Abbas

by Alex Joffe

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas's recent illnesses have again raised the matter of his successor. This brewing issue highlights contradictory aspects of Palestinian political culture. The leaders create chaos and then blackmail Western powers in exchange for containment of the unrest. Their next step is to internationalize the conflict by demanding unconditional support. Both tactics create dependency and fundamentally undermine Palestinian sovereignty. Trusteeship schemes for the West Bank illustrate the pattern of dysfunction. Only a concept of Palestinian sovereignty free of blackmail and internationalization would allow for a successful state, but this is thwarted by the concept of Palestinian national honor, which demands a return to an imaginary status quo ante.

"Après moi, le deluge" – a form of blackmail – has a long and ignoble history in international affairs. Fomenting chaos and touting one's own regime as the only possible safeguard is a basic policy tool of Palestinian Authority (PA) president Mahmoud Abbas. Internationalization of the conflict is another traditional tool. But what happens to the idea of Palestinian sovereignty when those two conflict?

Abbas is 82 years old and, as we are frequently reminded by Abbas himself, in poor health. His increasingly frequent hospitalizations are a reminder that his era of pseudo-stability will soon end. That pseudo-stability takes this form: the Israeli security apparatus keeps Hamas at bay in the West Bank, allowing Abbas to crack down on his rivals; and in exchange, the PA does not support a full-fledged uprising, only terrorism by individuals. The probability of chaos, in the form of Hamas efforts to take over the West Bank or factional warfare between "security services," is very real.

What will not end is the century-old Palestinian tradition of demanding that the international community take responsibility for the conflict, provide material support, and guarantee a political outcome that is favorable to them. This is done continually in

international fora like the UN and through the mechanisms of UNRWA, lawfare, and the international BDS movement. The Palestinians demand that they set the agenda and that the international community provide the muscle and the cash. Reciprocal demands are trivial and lip service only, such as an "end to incitement." Even so, without fanfare, Palestinian sovereignty, or the promise thereof, is compromised.

The myth of indispensability is an old trick pioneered by the *rais* himself, Yasser Arafat. Abbas's brinkmanship trades on the promise of his own mortality to extract material support from Europe and the US, much of which is then stolen, with full knowledge of the donors, by the PA. Abbas's repeated threats to dissolve the PA are also in line with this strategy. Apparently only he can simultaneously blackmail donors with the threat of uncontrolled violence and ensure that violence is limited through payoffs.

Similarly, threats of violent leadership contests between old-time Fatah members such as Muhammad Dahlan and Marwan Barghouti, or between nascent strongmen such as Jibril Rajoub, former head of preventive security in the West Bank, and Majid Faraj, chief of general intelligence, have been long discussed. The implicit promise to the West is, to paraphrase an apocryphal statement by US President Lyndon Johnson, they are bastards but at least they'll be our bastards. Of course, selecting among future blackmailers is no easy task, for Palestinians or the West.

But these internal Palestinian battles have another context – an international one. For one thing, they are funded by the international community and by Arab states through support to the PA. For another, the PA is always demanding that the international community uncritically support it and its political positions. Internationalization of the conflict, by generating antipathy towards Zionists, Israel, and Jews, has been a Palestinian strategy for a century. Third, no Palestinian leader is truly independent. All have become tools of larger movements, from Hajj Amin Husseini onward.

Through the very act of demanding international support, Palestinians long ago lost international leadership of their own issue as Arab and Muslim regimes have used it to rally their own societies and, along with the Soviet bloc (and now the global red-green alliance), to create a wedge against the West. But where does all of this leave the idea of Palestinian sovereignty? By choice and by default, there has never actually been any, nor do Palestinian political elites promise any. The future shape of their own society has been out of their hands for decades. The pattern continues today. By internationalizing the conflict, Palestinian elites demand solutions imposed from outside on their own impossible terms, but settle for payoffs from donors unwilling to exercise their leverage.

Perhaps it is time to turn the tables and consider true internationalization.

One concept is the idea of trusteeship for Palestine. Direct trusteeship is again being discussed haphazardly in the wake of the latest Gaza border conflict as part of broader

calls for the international community to protect Palestinians. In the early 2000s, the [idea of trusteeship was proposed](#) by liberal Israeli politicians, as well as by [former American negotiator Martin Indyk](#). The idea, which dates [from 1948](#), has been touted as a [legal "guidepost"](#) for a modern Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement that would include giving Palestinian "refugees" the "right of return" to Israel. Trusteeship was even a [policy proposal](#) by a left-wing candidate for the US Senate. More locally, the idea of an [Arab trusteeship for Palestine](#) has been discussed and dismissed as a means of disenfranchising Palestinians.

Nor is that an empty charge. Any sort of trusteeship would put foreigners in control of the most sensitive (and corrupt) aspects of Palestinian society: the economy, the political system, and the security apparatus. Foreigners could, in theory, run these critical aspects with far more honesty and transparency than Palestinians. In reality, Palestinian ire would translate quickly into violence against foreigners and Israelis. The foreigners would flee, the Israelis would defend themselves, and the entire arrangement would be upended. Foreign powers could not successfully attend to security arrangements on the Israeli border crossing to Gaza, much less ensure a demilitarized southern Lebanon.

De facto trusteeship is implicit in calls for Jordan and Egypt to assume responsibility for, or somehow merge with, Palestine. The mantra "Jordan is Palestine" has been heard for decades, primarily from the Israeli right, which is anxious to squelch the idea of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank. There are three obvious weaknesses to this approach. First, the possibility of the Hashemite Kingdom voluntarily ceding power in favor of the Palestinians is nil. Second, the probability that this would create a confrontation state dominated by Palestinian rejectionists is high. Third, it does not answer the question of how or why West Bank populations would move east or be absorbed once they got there.

The possibility of a Jordanian-Palestinian confederation is more intriguing, though the political details remain vague. But both scenarios necessarily set up rivalries between East Bank and West Bank elites, neither of which appears anxious to give up their prerogatives for a comprehensive political solution, even one that could be beneficial in the long term. The net result would be factionalism and, at worst, civil war.

But in all cases, Palestinian national honor would appear to demand nothing less than steadfast opposition to any imposed solution that requires compromises. Palestinian political thought about the time after Abbas mostly seems to revolve around [magical thinking about Palestinian reconciliation](#), along with simultaneous demands that the international community and Arab/Muslim states unquestioningly support them in their evolving dysfunction. The contradictory dynamic of skirting the deluge while demanding international support continues.

There are deeper cultural subtexts of which Palestinians might not be aware. Ritual cries about the debilitating Israeli "occupation" notwithstanding, Abbas and his potential successors seem to be saying that Palestinians must be kept in a state of semi-underdevelopment and dependency as a result of their own fractiousness and propensity to violence, pending a magical return to the world of 1947, or 1917, when there was imaginary Palestinian sovereignty (meaning Muslim domination). But the current situation of chiefly blackmail and redistribution of stolen goods demands that Palestinians sacrifice their own sovereignty to protect their honor, while the international community must refuse to use the leverage it is being handed. (This analysis is of course unlikely to find favor among Palestinians.)

Being caught in contradictions of one's own making is familiar to all individuals and to many societies, but for Palestinians it is virtually a trademark of political culture. A true international solution would require them to give up control and make concessions they are palpably unwilling to make. But fully internationalizing the conflict would implicitly state that they are incapable of reforming their own society and politics, much less successfully negotiating with Israel. True internationalization would demand sacrifices they are unwilling to make, but Palestinian national honor prevents them from acknowledging the reality of their dependence and, more importantly, from accepting it without violence. Any meaningful concept of sovereignty as autonomous self-governance is lost.

There are no easy answers, but there is an advantage to calling out dysfunction and blackmail for what they are. And Abbas's passing will be an inflection point, for better or worse. Mentally breaking from a cycle of destructive behavior would be a good start, no matter what chaos follows. Materially, Western victims of Palestinian blackmail should make reciprocal demands and stop paying. But until Palestinians fully embrace the idea of sovereignty and abandon internationalization of the conflict, they will be trapped in contradictions created by their own history and culture.

Alex Joffe is an archaeologist and historian. He is a Shillman-Ingerman Fellow at the Middle East Forum.

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