



Are We Witnessing the End of the Palestinian Authority?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: In the past year, we have seen a crumbling of the Palestinian Authority's level of control over the West Bank. The PA is seen by many Palestinians as a corrupt organization that no longer represents their interests. Recent events in Nablus and Jenin suggest the possibility of a change in the status quo and an end to the PA-Israel order.

The month of April was marked by Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr, a time during which Palestinian unity is often put on display, or at least the semblance of such unity. Hamas and Fatah flags were hung on the Temple Mount, and both organizations declared their desire for national unity. However, beneath the surface, the situation was far less amicable. Although Fatah is trying to reach a fifth unity agreement with Hamas (after the agreements of 2006, 2011, 2014, and 2017), Hamas does not appear interested.

Meanwhile, a survey published on March 23 by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR) reflects alarming data that point to a trend for which Israel must be prepared. For the first time, a clear majority of the Palestinian public (52%) believe the collapse of the Palestinian Authority (PA) would be in the Palestinian interest. A 57% majority thinks the continued existence of the PA, meaning the preservation of the status quo, is in Israel's interest and that the fall of the PA would serve the Palestinian interest and that of the armed groups, particularly Hamas.

One of Fatah's greatest achievements was the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority, which was meant to be a Palestinian governmental expression of self-determination. It is a kind of state that was to have been the basis for a future Palestinian government to include the entire West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem. The vision of a two-state solution has eroded in recent years, and the Palestinians today believe its realization would be more similar to Donald Trump's 2016 peace plan than Bill Clinton's Camp David plan of 2000.

Palestinian society is now divided between two separate governing authorities. The Gaza Strip is controlled by Hamas, which is apparently independent and which is seen as an agent of deterrence towards Israel. The second is the PA, which is controlled by Fatah (in parts of the West Bank). The PA is viewed as an entity that cooperates with Israel in order to preserve its rule and material benefits.

Activity on Palestinian social networks over the years reveals that Hamas is more popular than any other Palestinian organization. In almost every election poll conducted from 2014 until today, Hamas leader Ismail Haniya has won the majority of voters over Mahmoud Abbas. (In the most recent poll, Haniya won 52% to Abbas's 36%.) Fatah and Hamas are almost equal in strength, though Fatah has a slight advantage. But when asked, "Who do you think best represents the Palestinian interest?", 26% of respondents say Hamas and 24% say Fatah.

Most strikingly, 44% believe neither party best represents the Palestinian interest. The largest party in Palestinian politics is an assortment of new local organizations such as the Lion's Den and local battalions in Nablus, Jenin, and elsewhere in the West Bank. These local organizations do not see themselves as committed to a specific organization. What unites them is the war against Israel.

The PA is seen in the eyes of a large part of the Palestinian public as a corrupt governmental authority that colludes with Israel. The way to gain legitimacy among the public is through struggle and resistance. A whopping 58% of the public support a return to an armed intifada. Another 50% believe the current right-wing Israeli government is going to fall over the demonstrations opposing judicial reform.

There is a clear connection between the demonstrations and the undermining of the security of Israelis on the West Bank. The massive pressure of terrorist attacks together with disorder within Israel (notwithstanding the virtue or otherwise of the government's moves regarding legal reform) create an impression that Israel is disintegrating. The phrases "Israel is falling" or "Israel is collapsing" are gaining momentum on social networks. That being the case, it is little wonder that support

for a peace process between Israel and the Palestinians is at an unprecedented low, with 74% of the Palestinian public believing the two-state solution is no longer a relevant option.

What is relevant? Violent resistance. Hamas is increasing its pressure on the West Bank and in Jerusalem. The terrorists who murdered Rebbetzin Lucy Dee and her two daughters were a Hamas squad from Nablus. Hassam Badran, a Hamas spokesperson and a member of Hamas's political bureau, made clear that the policy of Hamas is to set fire to the West Bank. The attack in which the three women were murdered was described as a heroic strike "which completely removed the embarrassment from the [Islamic] nation in revenge for what was done to Murabitat al-Aqsa who were dragged by the occupation during their break into the blessed mosque in the month of Ramadan."

The Murabitat is an illegal organization of women who support Hamas and its operations on the Temple Mount against Jewish visits. Images of these women being denied entry to the Temple Mount or hurling insults and curses at passing Jews or police officers are common on Palestinian social networks. On April 10, 2023, Raida Said Jolani, one of the women of the group, was prosecuted after she expressed support for Hamas and terrorist activities against Israel. The Murabitat is in fact an arm of the Hamas organization operating in Jerusalem.

The terrorists recently killed in Nablus join terrorist Abdel Fattah Harusha, the murderer of brothers Hillel and Yigal Yaniv. Harusha was a Hamas operative who returned to Jenin after the attack, used the organization's infrastructure to hide, and was killed by IDF forces on March 7.

These were not isolated attacks. Rather, they reflect Hamas's conscious intention to field operatives in the West Bank and conduct as many attacks as possible.

The reality in the West Bank is that the PA, widely viewed as corrupt, is losing its power. Abu Mazen is seen as an illegitimate ruler in light of his repeated postponements of presidential and legislative elections. This is on top of stagnation in the peace process and the continuation of the existing status quo between the PA and Israel.

Hamas, meanwhile, strives to show that although it maintains relative calm in the Gaza Strip, it has not abandoned the path of resistance and continues to initiate terrorist acts against Israeli citizens and settlements in the West Bank and the Jordan Valley. The terrorists who were killed in Tulkarem on May 6 were a Hamas

squad, according to its publications, that carried out shooting attacks on Jewish settlements in the area and attacked several vehicles.

At this stage, it appears that Hamas's game plan is to destabilize the West Bank through increased violence, increase its popularity in that area in the process, and subsequently take control of the PA's power centers. The continuation of this explosive situation may well lead to the disintegration of the PA and a different government situation that Israel will have to deal with on the West Bank.

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