

Israel and the Palestinian Dilemma: Strengthening the Palestinian Authority or Containing Hamas

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Abstract

In the reality of the zero-sum game between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority (PA), a strong Hamas and a strong PA cannot coexist. The weakness of the PA alongside a strengthened Hamas, compounded by the erosion of deterrence against Hezbollah and Iran and the increased likelihood of a multi-front conflict, poses a strategic dilemma for Israel. Israel must define its strategic goal vis-à-vis the Palestinian arena, and consider whether there is any value to a formative military move against Hamas that is not part of a broader political plan. Weakened military capabilities would significantly reduce the challenge Hamas poses to the PA that accelerates its weakening, and remove an obstacle to effective moves to strengthen the PA. A weakened Hamas would also loosen the Gordian knot between the various arenas that Hamas seeks to tighten, and presumably also strengthen Israeli deterrence in the region. Under the existing political conditions, the current Israeli government is unlikely to agree on the need to strengthen the PA, or at least stop weakening it. Therefore, the government does not face a strategic dilemma on taking proactive steps to strengthen the PA, even though the PA's weakness harms Israeli interests: a move of this magnitude can only be led by a national unity government with broad public backing. At the same time, the status of the Palestinian Authority is so shaky and problematic that it is doubtful it can be restored under the existing conditions.

Keywords: Palestinian Authority, Hamas, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, national security, IDF, Gaza Strip, strategy

Background

Over the last three decades, the Palestinian Authority (PA) has posed a political and security challenge to the State of Israel. In Israeli eyes, the establishment of the PA, pursuant to the Oslo Accords, was intended to ensure a political separation between Israel and the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in order to [curb the threat of a binational state](#), improve the security reality, eliminate the burden of managing the daily life of the Palestinian population, and enhance Israel's regional positioning as a platform for additional peace and normalization agreements. While the Israeli mainstream has seen the PA as an autonomous entity that is less than a state, for the Palestinians, the PA was another step en route to an independent state.

Thus, while Israel hoped that the PA would improve Israel's security and advance its future as a Jewish and democratic state within recognized, defensible borders, and concomitantly fulfill Palestinian national aspirations, even if partially, the Palestinians saw the PA as an interim

stage. This, they believed, would be followed by the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, with the Palestinian leadership presenting the move as a historic concession by the Palestinians that settled for 22 percent of Palestine's territory. However, the rhetoric from Yasir Arafat, Faisal Husseini, and others that insisted on the historical narrative, institutional incitement, and the delegitimization of the existence of a Jewish nation state challenged the genuineness of intended historical concession.

The Weakness of the Palestinian Authority

Despite the hopes of many, almost three decades after the establishment of the PA and after a series of failed negotiations and policy initiatives, the Israeli-Palestinian political process has reached an impasse. Each side believes that time is working in its favor, lacks serious incentives to "go the extra mile" toward a permanent agreement, and does not have the political ability to lead significant moves based on historical compromises. At the same time, and for reasons stemming inter alia from the political impasse, the split between Hamas and Fatah, and Israel's policy of differentiation between the two Palestinian entities while containing Hamas, the PA, which is charged with managing the daily lives of the Palestinian population in the West Bank, is losing its power, public status, and public legitimacy. Furthermore, the PA is challenged by Hamas, which has established its control over the Gaza Strip and strives to undermine security stability in and from the West Bank, and is working to wrest control from the PA and push Fatah out of positions of influence. Thus beyond the historical reasons behind the current reality, which must be Israel's starting point for recalculating its route, it seems that the PA, under the leadership of Abu Mazen, is in the most severe situation since the days of the second intifada and on a path of ongoing decline that may end in its collapse.

First, from a security point of view, the PA and its security apparatuses do not control parts of the territory under their responsibility, as local organizations, alongside the known terrorist organizations, manage to expand their ranks and terrorist infrastructures for the purpose of launching terrorist attacks against the IDF and Israeli civilians in the West Bank and in Israel. Any attempt to pin the reasons for this on the Israeli military operations in Area A or on the composition of the current Israeli government falls short, because the PA's weakness in the northern districts, particularly the Jenin district, is in fact a reality that has evolved over at least two years. Rather, the reasons stem from the [makeup of the Palestinian security apparatuses](#), which continue to be based on regional and tribal loyalties. This situation impairs the functional ability of many of the PA security personnel, who are forced to act against family members and neighbors. In addition, experience shows that Palestinian terrorism does [not erupt only due to economic circumstances](#), as it is characterized by national and religious reasons and those related to a loss of trust in the existing leadership. Thus, the administrative and security vacuum created by the PA in the northern districts of the West Bank, with an emphasis on the Jenin area, has allowed the terrorist organizations and local armed groups to continue operating. All these underscore that the reality in the PA points to clear symptoms of [state failure](#), as evident in failing Middle East states after the Arab upheaval.

Second, the legitimacy of the PA under the leadership of Abu Mazen is at a low point in Palestinian public opinion. His continued resistance to terrorism and support for security cooperation is seen as irrelevant, not serving or promoting the Palestinian interest, and therefore illegitimate. A [June 2023 PCPSR poll](#) indicates that the majority of the Palestinian public believe that the PA is a burden on the Palestinian people (63 percent vs. 33 percent), and is dissatisfied with Abu Mazen's performance (80 percent vs. 17 percent), yet no popular or political act to depose him from power is evident. Furthermore, the majority of the Palestinian public believe that the PA's dissolution is in the interest of the Palestinian people (50 percent vs. 46 percent), and that its survival is in Israel's interest (63 percent vs. 34 percent). In addition, the Palestinian public supports the establishment of groups such as Lion's Den that are not under the control of the PA (71 percent vs. 23 percent) and opposes the PA's call for their disarmament (80 percent vs. 16 percent). These results illustrate that the Palestinian public spurns the PA and sees it as an Israeli instrument to perpetuate the occupation. In turn, it perceives the armed organizations and the armed struggle, and not the PA and the process of negotiations, as an instrument to continue the struggle against the occupation and the establishment of a Palestinian state. (The mirror effect can also be identified on the Israeli side, with the majority of the public believing that the PA is no longer a partner and that if a Palestinian state is established, it will become a terrorist state hostile to Israel.) In fact, the lack of trust in the PA runs deep, and most of the Palestinian public estimate that a third intifada will break out (51 percent vs. 46 percent), even though the majority believe that the PA's security forces will not participate ([62 percent vs. 33 percent](#)). The Palestinian public does not put its trust in external aid and believes that salvation will not come from the PA, nor from Arab countries, and certainly not from the Biden administration. Therefore, it seems that the Palestinian public understands that its fate is in its hands.

Third, while a political process is not on the horizon, the Palestinian public has radicalized its positions, and moved away from concepts related to the two-state solution and a political process with Israel (and here, too, a mirror effect can be identified among the Israeli public). [The June PCPSR poll](#) indicates that the majority of the Palestinian public oppose the two-state solution (70 percent vs. 28 percent) and believe it is not achievable (71 percent vs. 28 percent). Moreover, 52 percent of the Palestinian public believe that armed resistance is the preferred course of action to fulfill Palestinian national aspirations, compared to only 21 percent that assert that action should be taken through political negotiations. The corollary is that the majority of the Palestinian public support terrorist attacks inside Israel against civilians (57 percent vs. 38 percent). The narrative of the armed resistance is also fed by indoctrination and socialization processes led by the PA within the educational [curriculum](#), in the systematic incitement by Palestinian leaders through the media, in mosque sermons, and in payment to security prisoners and the families of terrorists who became "martyrs" and Palestinian national symbols.

At the same time, the terrorist campaign in Israel since March 2022 and the continuation of Operation Break the Wave, which began in May 2022, also feed the narrative of the armed resistance and create a reality of ongoing and increasing friction, which in turn leads to a high number of casualties on the Palestinian side. This [terror campaign](#) spurs more activity, and expands with the addition of many young people, who have long since lost their faith in the

PA, reject the existing order, and seek to change it through armed resistance based on local organizations, which are not necessarily associated with the recognized Palestinian terrorist organizations but are certainly supported by them. The daily friction produces new Palestinian heroes every day who become national symbols, fueling the level of motivation of more young people to join the circle of terror and resistance. As a result, after a year in which Israel is subject to the terror campaign, the number of Palestinians who take part in it has only increased, their motivation level has risen, the [scope of terrorism](#) has expanded, and the scope of activity of the Israeli security forces has grown. Thus, the security reality becomes more complex and dangerous, and the chance of widespread escalation is higher.

Significance of PA Weakness

The emergent picture, including the growing sense among [Hamas](#), [Hezbollah](#) and Iran that Israel is weak and at a breaking point, and that it is possible to act against it from several fronts simultaneously, is that the likelihood of a multi-arena and large-scale violent outbreak that poses a [significant challenge to Israel's national security](#) has increased.

The ongoing weakening of the PA and its limited ability to control the escalation on the ground invite the question as to the degree of influence that a stronger PA could have, with the common assumption in the Israeli security establishment that a stronger and functioning PA serves the Israeli interest and contributes to calm and security stability. Assuming that a strong PA can help reduce the violence and curb the deterioration, the question is, how can the PA be strengthened, and how can or should Israel contribute to such a move? Alternatively, if strengthening the PA is not a viable option in the current reality, both for Israeli internal political reasons and for those related to the Palestinian arena and its leadership, and on the assumption that the continued weakening of the PA will accelerate the security deterioration, Israel must examine ways to prevent further weakening of the PA or choose to make a unilateral move with the support of the US.

To the security echelon as well as the mainstream of the political echelon under the leadership of the Prime Minister Netanyahu, [Israel has a clear interest in a strong and functioning PA](#), which can govern effectively, meet the needs of the local population, work to eradicate terrorism, deepen security cooperation, and adhere to dialogue and the pursuit of a political settlement. On the other hand, in the [current Israeli right-wing government](#) there are elements that do not see a functioning and strong PA as a strategic need for Israel. Rather, they act and exert political pressure while encouraging initiatives on the ground to deepen Israel's hold on Area C and change the status quo in Jerusalem; in tandem, they demand more vigorous and forceful activity against Palestinian terrorism and the PA, which in their eyes is a supporter of terrorism. They believe the escalation and exacerbated tension will heighten the chaos in the territories and the process of the PA's weakening, in a way that will establish the justification for the expansion of Israeli settlement and lead to and even require an Israeli takeover of the West Bank that will obviate any chance of a political agreement.

In order to prevent the collapse of the PA, it is often said that [Israel must act to strengthen it](#) and take steps that help restore its security apparatuses and cultivate the Palestinian economy. However, Israel and the Palestinian leadership do not see eye to eye on the meaning of a strong PA. While the Israeli emphasis is on the functioning of the PA and its

adherence to a political process based on direct negotiations with Israel, the Palestinian leadership seeks a strong PA not only for the purposes of improved performance, but for the purpose of tightening political and civil control under conditions of lack of legitimacy. In other words, the goal is to preserve the existing power structure with a clear preference for the current leaders and their associates, and to improve capabilities and influence in the international arena to maximize the effectiveness of the [internationalization strategy](#). This, in complete contrast to Israel's perception, is defined in their eyes as a legitimate and preferred strategy that is not violent or interpreted as support for terrorism. Currently, as [Hamas](#), backed by Hezbollah and Iran, challenges the PA and Israel, improves its terrorist capabilities, tightens its grip on the PA territories, and encourages using the Temple Mount as a time bomb that foments multi-arena escalation, the question of strengthening the PA becomes more complex and necessarily caught up in Israel's policy toward Hamas. That is, any Israeli move to strengthen the PA must begin with a significant weakening of Hamas, because the idea of strengthening the PA, which in turn will lead to the weakening of Hamas, is no longer valid under the existing difficult circumstances. Weakening Hamas entails a tailored military move that must serve a broader political purpose and lead to the return of the PA to effective control in all its districts, inter alia, through the strengthening of PA's security forces in training processes in Jordan in the spirit of the agreements at the Aqaba and Sharm el-Sheikh conferences; the return of the PA to the Gaza Strip; reconstruction of the Gaza Strip as an expansion and additional component of the Abraham Accords, while mobilizing the leading partners in the Arab world; reconnection of the Gaza Strip to the West Bank; and amendment of the Paris Protocol to improve the PA's financial capabilities. All this should occur within the framework of renewing the political process with the Palestinians.

Hamas's political strength does not rest only on its ideology, nor only on the negative sentiment toward the PA. The source of Hamas's strength is its military capabilities, its full control of the Gaza Strip thanks to its military power, and its cooperation infrastructure with Iran and Hezbollah, which allows it to advance its military buildup in the West Bank, launch and operate the terrorist infrastructures, undermine the security reality, and undermine the stature of the PA. The leadership of Hamas in the Gaza Strip and beyond demonstrates self-confidence bordering on arrogance, and works to implement the organizational strategy without substantive Israeli interference. Israel, for its part, continues to act against the Gaza Strip under the logic of containment and refrains from overly harsh moves and responses in order not to undermine the security reality vis-à-vis the Gaza Strip, and avoids targeting Hamas leaders abroad, with an emphasis on Saleh al-Arouri. Overall, its moves against Hamas are characterized by a contained and moderate reactivity.

The Israeli Dilemma

The weakness of the PA as Hamas is strengthened—and given a certain erosion of deterrence against Hezbollah and Iran and an increased likelihood of a multi-frontal conflict—confronts Israel with a strategic dilemma. The existing reality between Hamas and the PA, which is controlled by Fatah, is that of a zero-sum game, i.e., it is not possible to have a strong PA along with a strong Hamas. Weakening Hamas means damaging its military assets and infrastructure. In order to realize this goal, Israel must redefine its strategic purpose vis-à-vis the Palestinian arena and, as such, the strategy of action vis-à-vis Hamas, namely, to inflict

severe and continuous damage to Hamas's military capabilities and obstruct reconstruction and re-intensification efforts. This means a military confrontation against Hamas in the form of extensive activity in the Gaza Strip and against the Hamas leadership abroad, which must be led to feel insecure and pursued. Such a strategic choice has a price, and early preparation is required for the Israeli home front and for other arenas in the event of escalation and participation by other actors who seek to demonstrate solidarity with Hamas or take advantage of the opportunity, as well as for the regional and international arenas. Above all, however, it is imperative that there be a decision regarding the strategic goal that Israel seeks to reach vis-a-vis the Palestinian arena, and it must be examined whether there is any significance to a formative military move against Hamas that is not part of a broader and more comprehensive political plan. In any case, harming Hamas's military capabilities will significantly reduce the challenge posed to the PA and the process of its weakening, remove an obstacle to moves to strengthen it, and loosen the Gordian knot between the various arenas that Hamas seeks to tighten around Israel, and it is likely that this will also strengthen Israeli deterrence in the region.

Moreover, even if Prime Minister Netanyahu succeeds in suppressing the opposition by the more extreme elements and convinces the Israeli government that realizing the Israeli interest of a strong and functioning PA requires proactive moves, Israel will be required to address the following questions:

- a. How can the PA be restored by force to have full control of the Gaza Strip?
- b. How can the framework of the Abraham Accords be expanded and a partnership established with important Arab countries to lead a significant reconstruction project for the Gaza Strip?
- c. Is it correct to make the operation conditional on agreement ahead of time for postoperative construction that is not conditional on a prisoner deal (if Hamas will not agree to release prisoners and bodies of fallen soldiers without a significant release of prisoners)?
- d. Will strengthening the PA make it a more dangerous adversary due to Israeli, Arab, and international support, which will bolster the Palestinian internationalization strategy and deepen the political impasse, with the responsibility placed on Israel?
- e. How can the risk be reduced that strengthening the PA will be interpreted as the work of "political engineering" (interference in Palestinian internal politics and succession struggles), which will lead to its weakening when perceived by the Palestinian public as cooperating with Israel and perpetuating the occupation?
- f. Assuming that in exchange for the effort to strengthen it Israel succeeds in influencing the PA to return to the political process, what is Israel's strategic objective and the goal defined for the political process, and what will be the implications in case of another failure? In addition, will Israel be able to mobilize regional and international support (mainly United States) for the Israeli goals of the political process?
- g. In the absence of a chance for a breakthrough that would advance Israel's strategic goals, and given the slim chances of significantly improving the PA's situation, is it more appropriate for Israel to invest effort in an independent/unilateral move in the spirit of the Trump peace plan?

Under the existing political conditions, it is unlikely that the Israeli government will come to an internal agreement regarding the need to strengthen the PA, or at least stop working to weaken it. Hence, the current government is not standing on the horns of a strategic dilemma when it comes to proactive steps to strengthen the PA, even though PA weakness harms Israeli interests. Practically, a move of this magnitude can only be led by a national unity government with broad public backing. However, the PA's current position is so shaky and problematic that it is doubtful it can be restored under the existing conditions.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Under the conditions of the developing multi-arena conflict, even if currently it is essentially Palestinian and Iran only provides the inspiration and authorization, and while it is clear that Hamas is getting stronger while the Israeli deterrence toward it is weakening, any move to strengthen the PA as part of a broad strategic purpose, which is to renew the political process, must begin by weakening Hamas and changing the deterrence equation against it. Moreover, in order to guarantee the success of the moves to strengthen the PA, Israel must return the Palestinian arena to the reality of before Operation Break the Wave, suppress the terror campaign, and dismantle its infrastructure. For this purpose, rethinking the action strategy is required, as the strategy that Israel has adhered to since May 2022 has not been able to effect the desired strategic impact. In practice, the terror campaign against Israel has not weakened, the circles of terror have expanded both in terms of the scope of activity and the number of active participants, the level of motivation has not declined, and the narrative of armed resistance has gained increasing support from the Palestinian public.

The possibility of a multi-arena conflict, set in motion by Iran, underscores Israel's need for a calm Palestinian arena that is less enthusiastic about joining such a conflict. A stronger PA can certainly be an important and helpful factor for this purpose. However, when the uncertainty is high, Israel cannot design an effective strategy to strengthen the PA on its own, without a defined political objective that shapes a military move to the same end, and without producing a relevant response to strengthen deterrence against Hezbollah and to weaken Iranian inspiration and support. In order to minimize risks, Israel must find a way to mobilize and engage the support of the important Arab countries and the international community, with an emphasis on the United States. In practice, only a national unity government can make a comprehensive move of this kind. If Israel cannot successfully implement such an effort, it would do well to consider a unilateral move that requires a broad public consensus, which can only be achieved through a government of national unity. Only an Israeli national unity government will be able to make difficult, effective decisions and implement them successfully.

In conclusion, a strong and functioning PA is in Israel's interest. However, strengthening the PA cannot comprise free handouts or hollow rhetoric. It must include the weakening of Hamas and the launch of a political process. Terrorism should be fought in every way, with Hamas weakened on a large-scale platform. Yet these operational achievements must not be realized without a broader strategic framework, which includes the political effort to prevent the slide into a one-state reality.

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