The Palestinian Authority’s Inability to Get Out of Its Own Way

The PA is poised to emerge from the chaos in Gaza better positioned than it has been in years. But its inability to lead or to even adapt will instead leave it weak, ineffectual, and barely relevant.

By Michael J. Koplow
February 22, 2024

Hamas’ October 7 attacks have left destruction in their wake no matter where you look. Whether it be Israeli lives and Israelis’ sense of security, Palestinian lives and infrastructure in Gaza, the reputation of Israeli intelligence, the continued viability of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu’s ruling coalition, or (thankfully) Hamas’ military capabilities and battalions of fighters, almost nothing and almost nobody has emerged in a better position than before. One of the only exceptions is the Palestinian Authority, an entity that was viewed by Palestinians, Israelis, the region, and the international community before October 7 as a weak and struggling group on its last legs, and is now widely seen as the key to restoring some semblance of order out of the current chaotic mess. While it is not as though the PA has suddenly been imbued with legitimacy, capability, or staying power, it is now seen as the only existing Palestinian alternative to Hamas’ political vision of nihilistic terrorism, and thus there is a renewed commitment to making the PA work. Both in terms of figuring out a PA role in Gaza and the evergreen goal of strengthening the PA in the West Bank, the PA finds itself being wanted, and even needed, in a way that it has not in well over a decade.

And yet, true to form, the PA is doing what it can to turn lemonade back into lemons. Not content to leave behind Mahmoud Abbas’ regrettable inability to clearly and without hedging condemn the October 7 attacks in their immediate aftermath, the PA’s latest gambit is to do what it can to rehabilitate Hamas and memory hole October 7. While officials at the Munich Security Conference slammed Hamas—including Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry, who called it outside the Palestinian consensus and declared it still unwilling to give up violence—Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh took a different tack. In arguing for Hamas to show up to Russian-mediated
talks between Palestinian factions in Moscow—itself a slap in the face to the U.S. and European countries trying to rehabilitate the PA in order to give it a central role going forward—Shtayyeh insisted that people should stop focusing on October 7, and should instead focus on Palestinian unity. For a Palestinian politician who has argued for years that Israeli actions in the West Bank and Gaza are an extension of the nakba from over 75 years ago, dismissing an Israeli trauma from less than five months ago may seem like an extreme rhetorical jump. But it is also a necessary one if the project is not to sideline Hamas, but to use October 7 as a way to bind Hamas even more closely to the Palestinian national project. It is of a piece with recent talks between PA official Jibril Rajoub and Hamas political chief Ismail Haniyeh aimed at establishing a national unity government, and has an internal logic inside Palestinian circles while coming off as tone deaf at best and inflammatorily callous at worst outside of Ramallah.

Palestinian unity has long been an imperative, and October 7 has not changed that. Having the West Bank and Gaza ruled by separate entities has not served Palestinians well, and as Netanyahu infamously said in 2019 in a rare moment of unguarded honesty, it was the very root of Israeli strategy to prevent a Palestinian state. But Palestinian unity means developing a consensus around the Palestinian national project in a way that adheres to principles that the rest of the world can accept and having an entity with legitimacy to govern both the West Bank and Gaza. Following October 7, and while Hamas leaders vow to carry out more such attacks whenever the opportunity presents itself, that cannot mean asking Israelis to get over what just happened. Hamas leaders cannot be treated as legitimate actors to be rehabilitated before they demonstrate some measure of contrition and a complete measure of renouncing their addiction to violent armed resistance. If PA officials believe that their current moment of resurgence will last even ten seconds beyond a grand national unity announcement with an unreformed and recalcitrant Hamas, they are badly misreading the room. That goes double for getting Israelis on board with any PA role anywhere while the Palestinian prime minister is telling Israelis to get over it despite 134 Israeli hostages still being held in Gaza and remains of murdered Israelis still being identified.

The cynical read of PA overtures to Hamas is that PA officials read the same polls as everyone else showing Hamas’ popularity in the West Bank relative to Fatah, and want to capitalize on it by aligning themselves with the popular mood. The less cynical read is that PA officials believe that with Hamas terrorists literally on the run in Gaza and having been thoroughly routed in the West Bank, this is now a golden opportunity to bring them to heel politically on the PA’s terms. The problem with this latter interpretation, assuming that is the approach, is that thinking that Hamas will be coopted is a different version of the same mistake that led many (sheepishly raises hand) to think before
October 7 that Hamas had been coopted and deterred. In fact, there is every reason to think that a Hamas that is perhaps at its weakest in terms of hard power but its strongest in terms of soft power will instead overwhelm Fatah and the PA if brought into Palestinian political and governing institutions, and that it is the PA that will be coopted rather than the other way around.

The way forward must be to make Hamas less popular rather than rehabilitate it. There is a golden opportunity for Abbas and company to isolate Hamas while it is in organizational disarray, and in so doing build trust with every regional actor not named Iran, Qatar, or Turkey. But that requires a PA that will lead, that will tell Palestinians hard truths, that isn't afraid to adapt to changed circumstances rather than spout the same slogans and positions and take the same approaches that it has nearly uninterrupted for three decades. Instead, the PA is misreading the mood, and talking about Hamas as a legitimate and essential Palestinian political actor. Netanyahu has spent four and a half months equating Hamas with Fatah and the PA, talking about how Hamastan cannot be replaced with Fatahstan, while Bezalel Smotrich says that Palestinians are all Nazis or Nazi supporters. Choosing now to talk about a national unity government that gives Hamas even more legitimacy plays directly into the hands of the Israeli far-right, and gives Netanyahu fuel for his anti-two states crusade. The PA is making it easier than ever for the Israeli government to not move forward on anything involving the day after in Gaza, as no Israeli will rightly agree to a PA role for Gaza if it means bringing Hamas right back to where it was.

Palestinians need to be unified; it is the sole prerequisite for moving forward on statehood, and is the only hope of a future Palestinian polity that is not riven by violent factionalism. But it isn't credible to condemn the presence in the Israeli government of crypto-authoritarians like Smotrich and fascist wannabes like Itamar Ben Gvir, each of whom represents a non-trivial segment of Israelis and strains of Israeli political ideology, while also arguing that actually authoritarian and fascist Hamas must be brought into the PLO or the PA because it represents a non-trivial segment of Palestinians. When all is said and done, there will have to be a genuine reckoning with Palestinian support and sympathy for Hamas and its methods, and it will also require a genuine Israeli reckoning with policies that have contributed to that support and sympathy. But if the PA wants its current perceived indispensability to be anything more than fleeting, it should be seeking ways to keep Hamas down rather than raise it up.

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