

## **What If the Palestinian Authority Disbands?**

*Habithonistim - is an organization which aims to educate, influence and shape the narrative about Israel's strategic national security needs, in order to create a secure Israel for today and future generations. The organization consists of over 2000 high-ranking Israeli reserve officers, commanders and operators from the IDF, Mossad, Shin Bet and Israeli Police, as well as some of Israel's leading academics and researchers. We offer an authoritative voice of reason with regards to issues of national security.*

Palestinian officials have recently threatened that if Israel applies sovereignty in parts of the West Bank territories of Judea and Samaria, they will stop the Palestinian Authority from operating. This study examines the significance of this threat, regardless of the very low likelihood of this scenario.

The very existence of the Palestinian Authority has been the most significant achievement of the Palestinian national movement, and the collapse of the PA could lead to a Hamas takeover of the Palestinian political system in the West Bank. In addition, the disintegration of the PA could harm the source of income for its many officials and leaders.

Following Operation Defensive Shield in 2002, Israel faced a similar situation that had many common elements in today's situation. It resolved the problem of territorial management through Palestinian mayors and provincial governors.

Even if the preferred option for Israel is to continue to maintain a functioning Palestinian Authority, the various alternatives, including one where Israel will retain its responsibility for the territory over time, are not any worse.

First, the direct financial burden involved is insignificant, and secondly, the Palestinian Authority will have difficulty continuing the struggle against Israel with the tools at its disposal, compared to if the PA had continued control of the area.

Palestinian officials have recently threatened that if Israel applies sovereignty in parts of the West Bank territories of Judea and Samaria, they will stop the Palestinian Authority from operating or even cause the PA to fall apart and dissolve itself. This study examines the significance of these threats' actualization, regardless of the likelihood of this scenario, which has so far been very low. This is because the very existence of the Palestinian Authority has been the most significant achievement of the Palestinian national movement, and the collapse of the PA could lead to a Hamas takeover of the Palestinian political system in all the territories. In addition, the PA has responsibility for the Palestinian population under its control, and the disintegration of the PA could harm its source of income for its many officials and leaders, who are the primary beneficiaries of the PA's revenue,

The Israeli move to extend sovereignty has caused great frustration among Palestinian leadership and could lead the PA to take extreme steps. This study represents a contingency study of various Palestinian options. It

should be emphasized that even if the Palestinian Authority should decide to take such measures, it is more likely that if it ceases to function, but it will not totally disintegrate. In doing so, the PA can also try to renounce all its civil obligations, compelling Israel to ostensibly bear the cost of its actions, while at the same time continue to act as the political representative for the Palestinians for legal, political, economic, religious, educational, or security matters. Following Operation Defensive Shield in 2002, and after the establishment of the Palestinian Unity Government, Israel faced a similar situation that had many common elements in today's situation. It resorted to managing its relations with the Palestinians through Palestinian mayors and provincial governors.

In general, the critical scenario to consider is that Israel, as a controlling force in the Judea and Samaria region, will assume responsibility for the territories that are currently under PA control in Areas A and B. It is assumed that this will be a transitional stage until Israel finds a Palestinian entity to assume responsibility for the area and its residents, as Israel has no intention to rule the Palestinians.

The main conclusion from the following analysis is that even if the preferred option for Israel is to continue to maintain a functioning Palestinian Authority, some of the alternatives, including one where Israel will retain its responsibility for the territory over time, are not much worse. First, the direct financial burden involved is relatively not very significant, and secondly, the Palestinian Authority will have difficulty continuing the struggle against Israel with the tools at its disposal, compared to those if the PA continued control of its territory.

**The Basic Premise of this Analysis Is:**

In the Palestinian system, there is a continuous tension between the commitment to the national struggle, which aims to liberate all of Palestine from Zionism (first by establishing a Palestinian state in the 1967 territories, which will serve as the basis for completing the conquest), and the desire to improve the quality of life of the Palestinians. The PLO and the PA, and of course the more radical organizations such as Hamas, give clear priority to the national struggle, while also providing necessary attention to the quality of life. Hence, their readiness to uphold the status quo, which is based in their view of a modus vivendi, whereby Israel is willing to accept Palestinian efforts to promote the national struggle, while still taking care of Palestinian quality of life, in order to mitigate Palestinian violence. The Palestinians have turned Israel's addictive commitment to preserving this modus vivendi to leverage threats against Israel and extract economic benefits from it, which are used to advance the Palestinian fight against Zionism. The success of Palestinian threats is evident in Israel's failure to implement its own laws to freeze funds used to pay terrorists' salaries, its failure to take action against the PA for its appeal to the International Criminal Court or for its incitement and hate indoctrination, as well as allowing Qatari money to flow into Gaza.

This Israeli weakness derived from the addiction to the existence of a functioning Palestinian Authority and PA security cooperation is the background to the Palestinian threats that the PA will cease to function or even exist. The PA figures that Israel will panic and reconsider its intention to apply sovereignty. It seems that some elements of Israel's security

establishment have been intensifying this feeling for Israeli decision-makers for years.

Facing the Palestinians who prioritize the Palestinian struggle even if it means harming the quality of life (who, in this context, oppose normalization with Israel, refuse to accept tax money collected for them by Israel, and reject the quality of life offered by the American peace plan, all in order to send this message) there are quite a few Palestinians who believe that the chances of success of the national struggle are so low at this point that Palestinian priorities should be changed to improving quality of life. This does not mean that they are necessarily less committed to the long-term goals of the Palestinian people, as formulated by the PLO. The vast majority are committed to it. However, they believe the price the Palestinian people pay for prioritizing the national struggle is unjustified.

On the opposite side, many Palestinians believe that failure of the national struggle stems from the PA's moderation and Abbas' use of restrained methods, namely the "popular resistance" (which includes terror without the use of explosives and firearms) and political struggle. For them, the success of the struggle requires increased use of armed struggle/jihad. For those pushing for alternatives to the PA policies, the PA's dissolution or a freeze of its activities will prove the virtue of their cause and encourage them to continue in their path.

For the pragmatists who favor prioritizing quality of life at this stage, the dismantling of the PA or the cessation of its activity will signal the loss of

primacy of the Palestinian struggle and of the view that the commitment to Oslo as a framework (while continuously violating the agreements) is an effective way of promoting the national aspirations of the Palestinians. In this new reality, which also reflects a new paradigm in Israeli policy, Palestinians of this view, those who came to the economic conference in Manama and expressed a desire to promote economic cooperation with Israel, may present themselves as an alternative with the support of some pragmatic Arab states. They will not be able to do so immediately, but only after some time has passed. It is doubtful that there is any point in pushing them, but under a proper strategy, with attentiveness to their belief, they can achieve public legitimacy that may eventually make them a viable alternative to the civil administration and later, perhaps, also to assume domestic security responsibilities.

In addition, because Palestinian national consciousness is based to a considerable extent on clan and regional consciousness, local power factors can be considered as a component of civilian control in the various spheres (in a refined format of Dr. Mordechai Kedar's Emirates proposal<sup>1</sup>). Under these new circumstances, one might expect to see the way to fresh thinking about solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that would be in line with Israel's security needs and with justified Palestinian aspirations.

**Alternative A – Israel controls the entire territory over time.**

In this alternative, Israel takes over all the security and civilian powers of the PA. It will have to deal, at least in the first phase, with attacks and rioting that will require a significant concentration of forces, while at the same time, the IDF will have to activate a civil administration to carry out basic civil service tasks.

Contrary to the frequently heard claims, Israel's direct financial expenditures required for providing civil services for Palestinians are not that significant. According to the last annual budget released by the Palestinian Authority, the 2018 budget, out of the total expenditure of about 16.5 billion shekels, about 9.2 billion shekels were earmarked for expenditures that Israel will not need to pay (for instance, 1.3 billion as payments to terrorists and their families; 426 million shekels for the PLO budget; 256 million shekels for the budget of the president; 3.6 billion shekels for the Interior Ministry budget, which includes the security forces budget; 106 million shekels for the Ministry of Jerusalem; 312 million shekels for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its embassies; 305 million shekels in debt payments; and 1.6 billion shekels for pensions, etc.). The remaining budget, about 7.3 billion shekels, can be almost entirely covered by the taxes that Israel collects for the PA from the wages of Palestinians employed in Israel and on the goods imported to the PA through Israel. (Control of the education budget raises again the question of the curriculum, namely whether Israel will supplement the curriculum dictated by the PA, or will it act to change the curriculum.)

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Obviously, in addition to these direct expenditures, Israel will have significant expenditures, at least in the first few months, due to the need to deal with security risks. At this stage, it is difficult to estimate the extent of these expenditures by the IDF. The Chief Financial Officer will have to assess the extent of reinforcements required, the duration of the reinforcements, and the costs involved. This assessment should take into account the fact that in any case, the IDF is operating forces now in all areas of the Palestinian territories, and that applying sovereignty does not in itself require changes to the existing military order (beyond what is required due to concerns over increased protest and terrorism and the PA's failure to act). The total dismantling of the PA will require Israel to take care of internal security as well, which, to some extent, increases the burden on Israel.

In any case, these sums are far less than the tens of billions of shekels, which opponents of applying sovereignty claim as the potential cost in an attempt to warn Israeli decision-makers, as Israel will not apply its sovereignty over the PA's territories and not even over the Area C lands designated for the Palestinians under the Trump plan. Israel will not have to pay national social insurance and pensions on an Israeli scale to two and a half-million residents of these areas.

On the other hand, it is difficult to estimate the indirect economic cost of applying sovereignty to the Israeli economy, considering the probable intensification of violence and terrorism and the possible punitive measures that will be taken by some European countries and the increased activity of the boycott movement against Israel. It is also hard to estimate the

additional cost of applying sovereignty due to the economic and health implications of Covid-19 both on Israel and on the Palestinians.

**Alternative B – The Palestinian Authority returns to function after a certain period.**

It is likely that after a short period of time during which the PA will not function, it will still continue to exist and even maintain its security mechanisms to prevent Hamas taking control of the territory. Pressure will be exerted on the PA both domestically and from abroad, from Europe and from some U.S. Democrats, and from the pragmatic Arab states, to resume its activities. Whatever the outcome of the U.S. elections, the Palestinian Authority is likely to return to its full functions. Be it because it has to reconcile the harsh reality of another four years with a Trump government trying to advance a peace plan disapproved by the Palestinians, or alternatively, out of willingness to cooperate with the Biden administration that promises Palestinians a return to their old tactics of granting them the veto power over any change in the legal status in the territories. This means that in any case, even if the PA stops its own operations but is not completely disbanded, its suspension of operations would only last for a short term.

**Alternative C – Gradual transfer of control over the territory to local Palestinian leadership.**

If the PA disintegrates, the resulting vacuum of power may, over time, be filled by alternative leadership, which prioritizes quality of life as a more important goal for the time-being than the national struggle against Zionism, while not completely giving up on this goal. Initially, this logic may

enable collaboration with the mayors who are committed to the quality of life of the population they are entrusted with, and later this cooperation may expand and take place with clan leaders, merchants, businessmen, and labor leaders, many of whom are in favor of this concept. Cooperation with mayors can begin immediately, while the development of alternative leadership may occur only after a time, in order to gain public confidence. The Palestinian public has been exposed for years and will continue to be exposed to continuous brainwashing, which places the national struggle as a priority. Thus, there will be a need for the continuous promotion of these alternative governing options and it is reasonable to expect harsh opposition to it.

**Alternative D – Different PA actors will assume powers in the succession struggle following Abbas.**

The bankruptcy of Mahmoud Abbas, which will probably result in the dismantling of the PA (and perhaps even with its more limited cessation of operations, though much less likely), may accelerate the struggle for power among those who claim PA leadership when its aging leader steps down. Another possibility, especially if President Trump wins the U.S. election, should not be overlooked, whereby Abbas announces his retirement and admits his failure to advance Palestinian national goals. Either way, the “War of Succession” may bring some contenders (e.g., Maj. Gen. Majed Faraj, head of the Palestinian Preventive Security, or Jibril Rajoub), to try to seize power, possibly with Abbas’ cooperation. In this context, these contenders may try to restart the PA and be prepared to secretly coordinate their activities with Israel to improve their standing in the succession struggle.

**Alternative E – Hamas will try to take over the area and fill the void.**

This is, of course, a problematic alternative in many ways (such as increasing terrorist attacks and unifying Gaza with Judea and Samaria under extremist leadership). Yet, this scenario should not be ignored. Despite the joint efforts of the PA and Israel to restrict its activities, Hamas still has the political and operational infrastructure and broad public support within the territories, and in the event of the disintegration of the PA, it can certainly try to seize power, presenting the view of its armed struggle against Israel as a preferable alternative to the ex-authority's approach. The advantage of such a move is that, following this, the Palestinian Authority may reverse its decision to disband and seek assistance from Israel in restoring the status quo.

**Conclusion: Alternatives to the PA as It Is Today Do Exist**

In conclusion, while continuing the prevailing situation is the preferred alternative, Israel can deal with the other alternatives. Some options present the possibility of alternative leadership that may emerge, inside or outside the PA, which may lead to a different view of Israeli-Palestinian relations and raise new opportunities. If the PA responds to Israel's extension of sovereignty with an interruption of its operations, rather than a complete dissolution, then it seems that after a few months, the PA could return to its activities, including a renewal of the security cooperation, which serves the PA no less than it serves Israel.

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In any case, Israel does not have to be hostage to the PA and make the PA's existence and its functioning central elements of Israeli security, especially as long as the PA adheres to the Palestinian narrative that ultimately calls for the destruction of Zionism and negates any arrangement recognizing Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people. At the same time, the Authority encourages terrorism by paying salaries to terrorists and their families and incites hatred against Israel both domestically and on the Arab and international stages. It should be clear that no Palestinian is going to accept any unilateral Israeli move regarding the legal status of any territory, even if some may be willing to assume responsibility for the daily needs of the Palestinian population and to lead the Palestinians in their attempt to promote their national interests.

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