The Palestinian Authority has failed: Local autonomy is the only viable future

written by Dr. Raphael BenLevi | 16.07.2025

The unprecedented violence of October 7 and the global collapse of confidence in the Palestinian Authority have created a moment of reckoning.

Among the quiet shifts now under way is a bold and controversial local initiative – the "Hebron Emirate" – which proposes an alternative vision of governance for Arabs in the Judea and Samaria: decentralized, clan-based self-rule, under Israel's overall security umbrella.

Though imperfect, the idea points in the right direction: the centralized model of Palestinian governance, embodied in the PA, has failed utterly and must be replaced with something more realistic, more accountable, and ultimately more conducive to peaceful relations on the ground.

A failed experiment

For three decades, the PA has been treated as the presumptive nucleus of a future Palestinian state. In reality, however, it is a corrupt, authoritarian, and dysfunctional regime, one that governs without legitimacy, incites against Israel, and systematically fails to meet even the basic needs of the people it is meant to govern.

Despite unprecedented international support and billions in aid, the PA has not built a viable political, economic, or social foundation for sovereignty. Elections have not been held in nearly 20 years, corruption abounds, critics can be jailed or worse, and the judiciary lacks independence. The economy is dependent on foreign aid and Israeli tax collection.

It is not clear whether the institution of the PA is capable of surviving beyond the lifetime of its current president, Mahmoud Abbas.

Perhaps most damningly, the PA continues to reward convicted terrorists with stipends and to broadcast anti-Israel incitement in the media. It refused to explicitly condemn the Hamas massacre, and its diplomats celebrated the attack. Its educational system glorifies martyrdom and demonizes Jews.

Yet many Israeli and Western voices still cling to the "two-state solution" as a theoretical endgame. They maintain that while now is not the right time, the door must be kept open for a future Palestinian state. This is not just naive; it is

reckless. Keeping the idea alive sustains Palestinian rejectionism and delays the search for real, workable alternatives.

A different vision: Local autonomy

Against this backdrop, the Hebron Emirate initiative, led by local tribal leaders seeking to govern independently of Ramallah, offers a compelling departure from the PA model. While the specifics of that plan may not be universally applicable, the broader principle is sound: governance should be localized, pragmatic, and rooted in organic social structures, not imposed from above by failed elites.

This model would involve dividing the Arab-populated regions of Judea and Samaria into several autonomous zones – revolving around cities like Jericho, Nablus, and Hebron – each managing its own municipal affairs, while allowing greater economic integration into Israel. These would not be sovereign states, but, rather, self-governing entities under the overall security control of Israel.
This approach offers several advantages: It reflects social realities, as Palestinian society is deeply fragmented politically, geographically, and tribally. A one-size-fits-all state governed from Ramallah has always been an artificial construct. Local governance aligns more closely with existing social loyalties. It incentivizes accountability, as local leaders are more responsive to their communities and can be held accountable in ways the distant and corrupt PA cannot.
It undermines rejectionism, as decentralized governance deprives the Palestinian national movement of its centralizing myth – the dream of a state built on the ruins of Israel – and replaces it with pragmatic, service-oriented leadership, truly reconciled with Israel's existence. Instead of all-or-nothing statehood, Palestinians can develop institutions, economies, and social systems incrementally – measured by performance, not slogans.

The Shin Bet and the IDF are the crucial fighters of terrorism in the region, not the PA

The main objection voiced to the new initiative is that, despite all its problems, the PA is needed for the security coordination that it maintains with Israel, which assists in the daily fight against terrorism originating in the areas it purports to control.

While it is true that the PA engages in some level of security coordination with Israel – particularly against Hamas – it does so primarily out of self-preservation,

not out of commitment to peace or normalization. This cooperation is tactical and limited, designed to maintain its own hold on power.
Israel’s most critical counterterrorism successes stem from the efforts of its own intelligence services, especially the Shin Bet (Israel Security Agency), not from the PA. Even during periods when the PA suspended coordination, Israel managed to prevent large-scale terrorist waves, demonstrating that its core security capabilities do not depend on Ramallah.
Expanding localized governance models, like the Hebron initiative, does not mean abandoning counterterrorism; it means moving beyond a dysfunctional partner whose cooperation is shallow and unreliable, and toward a structure that better reflects reality and serves long-term stability.

Ending the Oslo delusion

Oslo was built on the fantasy that a fundamentally anti-Israel movement led by former terrorists could be empowered to create a peaceful, democratic state. Instead, it created a kleptocracy dependent on foreign money, steeped in rejectionist ideology, and incapable of reform.

The Hebron Emirate idea breaks that mold. It reflects a crucial insight: that legitimate governance grows from the bottom up – from communities, clans, religious structures, and local traditions – not from international conferences or terrorist supporters in suits.
The Hebron Emirate is not a perfect or fully formed solution. Perhaps power should be transferred to existing municipal governing institutions more than informal clan structures. But it points in the right direction. It should spark a serious rethinking of how both peoples can live with dignity and security.
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