The Day After in Gaza

written by Dr. Raphael BenLevi | 27.11.2023

Israel has declared its war aims as the destruction of Hamas' military and governance capabilities, but what should its plan be for the day after? Since the beginning of the war, some prominent figures in the United States and the Israeli media and former establishment have raised the idea of installing the Palestinian Authority (PA) as the governing body for civilian affairs. However, such a course of action would inevitably result within a few years in the emergence of a new terrorist state hostile to Israel, possibly even under the control of a re-emerged Hamas. If the IDF fights to eradicate Hamas rule and a similar entity rises in its place, this will constitute a historic failure, a fatal blow to Israel's national resilience, and an existential threat to the future of the country.

The most feasible alternative is an autonomous Arab civilian entity in Gaza, with Israel maintaining overall security responsibility for as long as required by the security situation and threat assessment. However, to ensure that such an autonomous entity remains viable, does not revert to serving as a base for murderous terror attacks, and would be willing to live in peace with the State of Israel, several conditions must be met.

In Gaza today lives an entire generation that has been indoctrinated into Hamas' genocidal ideology, and there exists no organized opposition movement to speak of. As a result, if a new leadership would be established tomorrow based upon local or familial allegiances, it would almost certainly be comprised of Hamas sympathizers, if not supporters, opposed to coexistence with Israel.

The only way to create a political entity in Gaza that is not hostile to Israel will be for the public to undergo a deradicalization process, similar to the de-Nazification process carried out in postwar Germany, during which civil society underwent a profound transformation leading it to reject Nazi ideology. This transformation was made possible through numerous steps, including public trials against Nazi criminals, severe bans on expressions and symbols of support for Nazism, and the re-writing of educational material for an entire new generation. In Gaza, such a deradicalization process should be based upon a collective narrative that recognizes the utter failure and moral repulsiveness of the Hamas ideology. It should be recalled that de-Nazification was made possible by the Allied

occupation of Germany, followed by the establishment of a local government based primarily on individuals who had opposed the Nazis.

Without such a process of "de-Hamasification," any Arab-led political entity that arises in postwar Gaza will be hostile to Israel and eventually lead to the re-emergence of the terrorist state. Transferring power to the PA would guarantee this outcome. The PA is itself already a political entity hostile to Israel's existence. The current model in Judea and Samaria—overall Israeli security responsibility alongside PA civilian rule—is highly unstable, and its future is uncertain even in the near term. The PA is perceived by the public over which it rules as a deeply corrupt institution and holds dismal levels of support. According to a June 2023 poll by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh would defeat PA Chair Mahmoud Abbas by a large margin if Palestinian elections were held today. In the 2006 elections for both Gaza and Judea and Samaria, Hamas won a decisive majority. It is widely recognized that the reason Abbas has not agreed to hold new elections since 2006 is because Hamas would almost certainly win again.

Even if some Palestinians also feel disillusionment towards Hamas as an organization, a vast majority (71 percent) support the formation of new terrorist groups such as "Lion's Den" and the "Jenin Battalion." This demonstrates that the goal of murdering Jews and destroying Israel enjoys broad support in much of Palestinian society. The political debate centers around choosing which organization is best suited to attain these goals.

The only reason that Hamas' attack was launched from Gaza and not from Judea and Samaria is because of the extensive presence of the IDF and Israel's security services across Judea and Samaria, who are constantly preventing terror attacks and pursuing terror organizations. Creating a similar situation in Gaza under PA control will be just as unstable as it currently is in Judea and Samaria. There is no reason to believe that a PA-led government in Gaza will educate for peace and promote coexistence with Israel. Even today, the PA's educational materials educate for hatred and hostility towards "the Zionist entity." As a result of the PA's institutionalized incitement against Israel, it will constantly face the threat of being taken over by even more extreme entities such as Hamas.

Furthermore, removing Hamas just to install the PA will not achieve the required deterrence vis a vis Hezbollah. On the contrary, it will project Israeli weakness

and signal to Hezbollah that there is no tangible price to be paid for a confrontation with Israel, as the latter would likely make a similar move in Lebanon: a limited-duration takeover followed by a swift withdrawal.

If the IDF fights to conquer the Gaza Strip and remove Hamas, but within a few years, a hostile entity once again takes control of the territory, this will have a very significant demoralizing effect on both current soldiers and future draftees. Such a move would be a historic failure, a fatal blow to Israel's national resilience, and an existential threat to the country's future.

In order to ensure long-term stability and security in Israel, Gaza, and the broader Middle East, it is necessary to ensure that any future autonomous Arab entity in Gaza meets certain conditions that will ensure its commitment to peace and coexistence. Many relevant conditions can also be found in the "Peace to Prosperity" plan released by the Trump administration in January 2020.

Although the PA rejected the plan due to the Palestinian leadership's lack of interest in a lasting and viable peace with Israel, many of the conditions outlined in the document can help shape the path forward towards creating an autonomous Arab governing body in Gaza. It is important to emphasize that the PA does not even come close to meeting these conditions, and its involvement would be highly counter-productive.

The following is a list of relevant conditions drawn directly from the "Peace to Prosperity" plan. Where the plan's original language is applicable, it has been retained and presented in quotations. Otherwise, the substance has been retained, but the language and content have been edited or adapted to fit the current context.

Any Gazan autonomous governing body must recognize the State of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people, unambiguously and explicitly commit to nonviolence, and make clear that it rejects the ideologies of destruction, terror, and conflict.

"The Palestinians shall have ended all programs, including school curricula and textbooks, that serve to incite or promote hatred or antagonism towards its neighbors, or which compensate or incentivize criminal or violent activity… It is very important that education focuses on peace to ensure that future generations are committed to peace… Promoting a culture of peace… with the goal of creating

an environment that embraces the values of coexistence and mutual respect throughout the region."

"The creation of a culture of peace should include an end to incitement, including in government-controlled media, as well as an end to the glorification of violence, terrorism and martyrdom."

"It should also prohibit hostile propaganda, as well as textbooks, curriculum and related materials contrary to the goal of [an agreement], including the denial of one another's right to exist."

"The Palestinians shall have implemented a governing system with a constitution or another system for establishing the rule of law that provides for freedom of press, free and fair elections, respect for human rights for its citizens, protections for religious freedom and for religious minorities to observe their faith, uniform and fair enforcement of law and contractual rights, due process under law, and an independent judiciary with appropriate legal consequences and punishment established for violations of the law."

"The Palestinians shall have achieved civilian and law enforcement control over all of its territory and demilitarized its population."

A Palestinian government should cease to support "Boycott, Divest, and Sanction" (BDS) campaigns, anti-Israel initiatives at the United Nations and multilateral bodies, and any other efforts intended to delegitimize the State of Israel. Revisionist initiatives that question the Jewish people's authentic roots in the State of Israel should also cease.

"All Israeli captives and remains must be returned."

"It is unrealistic to ask the State of Israel to make security compromises that could endanger the lives of its citizens."

Gaza must be fully demilitarized, and Israel will maintain full security responsibility and control of the airspace, electromagnetic spectrum, and territorial waters.

All persons and goods will cross the borders into Gaza through regulated border crossings, which Israel will monitor. Israeli border crossing officials, using state-of-the-art scanning and imaging technology, shall have the right to confirm that

no weapons, dual-use, or other security-risk-related items will be allowed to enter Gaza.

“Security challenges make the building of a port in Gaza problematic for the foreseeable future.”

“The State of Israel has experienced the failure of international troops in Sinai (before 1967), Lebanon, Gaza, and the Golan. Given its experience, Israel’s first doctrine of security – that it must be able to defend itself by itself – is as salient as ever. It is a critical strategic interest of the United States that the State of Israel remain strong and secure, protected by the IDF, and continue to remain an anchor of stability in the region.”

An international fund should be established for infrastructure development, the cost of which is not expected to be absorbed by the State of Israel.

Capital raised through this international effort will be placed into a new fund administered by an established multilateral development bank. Accountability, transparency, anti-corruption, and conditionality safeguards will protect investments and ensure that capital is allocated efficiently and effectively.

Significant investments will require a governance structure that allows the international community to safely and comfortably put new money into investments that future conflicts will not destroy.

“The Palestinians shall have established transparent, independent, and credit-worthy financial institutions capable of engaging in international market transactions in the same manner as financial institutions of western democracies with appropriate governance to prevent corruption and ensure the proper use of such funds, and a legal system to protect investments and to address market-based commercial expectations.”

In the initial stage, to defeat and uproot Hamas, Israel will have no choice but to assume control of the entire Gaza Strip and set up a civilian administration, similar to how it administered Gaza from 1967 to 1994, until the Oslo Accords and transfer of power to the PA. During this period, the IDF maintained control of military affairs and oversight of civilian affairs, which were managed in conjunction with local representatives of the Arab population at the municipal level. It is important to note that during this period, there were far fewer attacks

against Jewish soldiers and residents, increased economic prosperity for all of Gaza's residents, and many examples of mutually beneficial coexistence. Following the installation of the PA in 1994, Hamas' power grew, terror attacks increased, and institutionalized incitement undermined much of this coexistence.

Israel is, of course, not interested in undertaking a long-term military administration of Gaza. It is, however, necessary that any future autonomous entity in Gaza meet the conditions that will ensure it lives in peace and coexistence alongside Israel. Anything less will ultimately devolve again into an unacceptable and existential threat to the State of Israel.

Published in The National Interest 27.11.2023