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New Tactics, new Risks: Abbas's Threat to Dissolve the Palestinian Authority

by: Jamie Levin

This past week, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas renewed his threat to dissolve the Palestinian Authority and hand responsibility for the administration of Palestinian lands back to Israel unless peace talks begin yielding results. Though the news was quickly overshadowed by the announcement of Hamas-PLO reconciliation, Abbas's threat ought to be taken seriously. Even if Abbas can deliver on the promise of Palestinian unity, the PA will remain a weak institution lacking in legitimacy until it achieves statehood. As the prospects for statehood diminish, Abbas will have little continued interest in maintaining peace, order, and stability, and will look for new and increasingly risky tactics—like dissolving the PA—with which to confront Israel. If pushed to these measures, the region will be even less stable and peace even less likely.

Since its inception, the Palestinian nationalist movement has relied on three main tactics: armed struggle, negotiations, and unilateral actions. Through armed struggle, Palestinian militants have delivered many punishing blows to Israel but achieved few substantive gains. Weakened by years of fighting, the Palestinian nationalist movement turned to negotiations at the end of the Cold War. These negotiations eventually bore fruit, leading to the creation of a Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank and Gaza strip on lands vacated by Israel. More recently, as progress in peace negotiations has slowed, the PA has turned to unilateral actions to advance its cause, seeking an upgrade of its status at the UN in 2012, and this month acceding to 15 international treaties and conventions. While these actions have proven popular on the Palestinian street, they have produced few tangible changes in the lives of ordinary Palestinians and are unlikely to do so in the future.

The Palestinian nationalist movement has proven remarkably flexible. Each time it has been stymied, it has altered its tactics, sometimes radically – from armed struggle to negotiations, and from negotiations to unilateral actions. Having once again reached an impasse, a new tactic has begun to emerge. In televised remarks last week, Abbas said, “This Authority has no authority anymore, and the reason is that it lost all its powers that it received after the Oslo agreement. We do not have any political, logistical, economical, or territorial responsibilities anymore. We have nothing. So we said that if Israel wants to continue with this policy and not give this authority its rights, let it come and take this authority.”

By threatening to dissolve the PA, creating a power vacuum in the West Bank, Israelis must contemplate the resumption of the occupation of millions of Palestinians. Israel vacated

administration of major Palestinian population centers in the West Bank and Gaza after a painful and costly military occupation, which most Israelis have no interest in resuming. Schooled in Moscow at the height of the Cold War, Abbas's tactic borrows from the Leninist adage: "The worse, the better." A renewed occupation would be unbearable for Israelis and Palestinians alike. Abbas hopes his threat will be enough to resume the stalled talks and force Israeli concessions at the bargaining table.

This novel tactic is simple and elegant, but also profoundly dangerous. Abbas' threat will only be taken seriously if there is a real possibility that it might be carried out. But, there is no guarantee that Israel would resume the administration of Palestinian lands if Abbas or another future leader were to close up shop. While nature abhors a vacuum, Israel has been content to let others fill them. Israel was careful not to be drawn into the vacuum left when it withdrew from southern Lebanon in the summer of 2000 or from the Gaza Strip in 2005.

This is where the danger arises. If the PA is dissolved and Israel doesn't assert control, a more radical group will fill the void, as Hamas did in Gaza and Hezbollah did in southern Lebanon. Or, local security chiefs might assume control, dividing Palestinian territories into personal fiefdoms. In either case, the result would likely be the maladministration of Palestinian territories, a suspension of international aid, and an increase in misery and violence. Worse, Israel would have the pretext to permanently wash its hands of peace negotiations and annex territories in the West Bank and East Jerusalem for settlements and security. Under such a scenario, peace, already a distant dream, would become nearly impossible to achieve.

Abbas's new tactic introduces a fog of uncertainty into an already precarious conflict. While Abbas has temporarily turned his attention to Palestinian unity, the new and dangerous tactic of threatening to dissolve the PA will remain so long as peace talks with Israel remain stalled. If they collapse and are not revived, and statehood remains a chimera, this threat could easily move from rhetorical brinksmanship into the realm of real possibility. This flirtation with the dissolution of the PA can only be avoided if negotiations are renewed in earnest.

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