

The Day After Abu Mazen – Simulation Summary

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On January 30, 2023, the Mitvim Institute held a simulation exercise to explore various scenarios related to Israel-Palestinian Authority (PA) relations, and the involvement of regional and international actors in this arena, in the wake of the departure of the PA President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), and against the backdrop of the new Israeli government.

The framework of the simulation was an emergency international summit convened at the initiative of the United States three days after the announcement of Abbas' passing, and in light of the relevant actors' need to confront this new reality. The opening scenario included the appointment of Civil Affairs Minister Hussein al-Sheikh and General Intelligence Chief Majed Faraj as interim PA co-chairs until elections are held. It was based on assumptions regarding the existing political reality in Israel following the establishment of a new government, tensions between Israeli security agencies and the political leadership of the settlement movement, as well as instability and violence on the ground.

The agenda focused on ways of maintaining stability in the region, steps to restore calm and a road map for future relations between Israel and the PA. Participants in the summit included Israeli and PA officials and representatives of Egypt, Jordan, the Gulf states, and the European Union (EU). The three Israeli players were Benjamin Netanyahu (prime minister), IDF Chief Lt. Gen. Herzl Halevi (security establishment), and Minister Bezalel Smotrich (settlement leadership). On the Palestinian side, the three players were al-Sheikh and Faraj (interim PA leadership), Marwan Barghouti (rival Fatah leadership) and Ismail Haniyeh (Hamass).

The discussion developed insights and conclusions regarding four basic issues that arose from the simulation:

1. Holding elections in the PA: Mahmoud Abbas' departure is naturally expected to place the long-dormant issue of PA elections back on the domestic, regional and international agenda. Since the presidential elections in 2005 and the legislative elections in 2006, no elections have been held in the PA. In January 2021, elections were announced, but in April 2021, the PA leadership postponed them indefinitely.

The simulation exposed the dilemmas expected to arise around this question, both in the internal Palestinian arena and in the international arena. In the internal Palestinian arena, a **temporary PA** leadership is likely to face a **dual challenge** from both the Hamas leadership and the "opposition" within Fatah, which is particularly identified with Marwan Barghouti, serving a life sentence in an Israeli prison, from Mohammed Dahlan, who operates from Abu Dhabi, and Nasser al-Qudwa, Yasser Arafat's nephew. They are likely to reject the authority of the interim

leadership and demand immediate elections. Opposition forces within Fatah might also coordinate with Hamas leaders on this matter.

The PA's interim leadership is expected to focus initially on efforts to increase stability and governance and weaken focal points of internal opposition, and will not rush to set an election date. At the same time, it will have to seek public and popular legitimacy by adopting a firmer line than Mahmoud Abbas toward Israel, especially vis-à-vis the new Israeli government's policies, and presenting tangible achievements in this regard. Two main variables will influence the dynamics in this arena: (1) The extent of public pressure on the leadership to hold elections. Strong public demand can be expected to hold elections, but the prospects of it translating into mass protests in the immediate term are unclear; agreement may be reached on a certain timeframe for preparations before elections are held. The position of influential figures in the PA's security agencies and the Palestinian prisoners' leadership will have great impact on the outcome of this issue. (2) The extent to which the opposition in Fatah is able to unite around one leader, rather than splitting into factions and rallying around different leaders. The role played by other Fatah actors, chief among them Jibril Rajoub and Mahmoud al-Aloul, is expected to have an impact in this context. Those among them who can quickly forge coalitions will have the upper hand.

The players in the international and regional arenas will also have to deal with the question of elections, and their position will have a significant impact. Will leading players in the international community demand immediate elections? To what extent will the PA be pressured on this issue? And what conditions will be presented regarding elections? The simulation revealed **that EU leaders are expected to lead the clearest line on holding elections**, and the EU financial support for the PA will lend this position added weight. The EU is also expected to call on Israel to allow Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem to participate in the voting, as was the case in the past. At the same time, the EU is unlikely to lead a significant diplomatic move on the issue, among other things due to internal division and its involvement in other arenas, chief among them Ukraine. It can be assumed that holding elections will not be defined by the EU as a condition for continued aid to the PA and the EU will probably act in coordination with the American administration. The Biden Administration is expected to support elections in principle and express a commitment to democratic values as part of its global leadership. At the same time, the administration is expected to express a more pragmatic stance on the election issue, which will allow, for example, agreement on a certain time period to prepare for elections. Such a gap between the US and Europe emerged during the 2021 PA elections' saga, when Europe demanded that the elections be held as planned, while the US did not express a clear public position.

The position of the Arab states will also have an impact on the issue, with Egypt and Jordan expected to express support in principle for elections, but presumably acting in coordination with the PA leadership on this question. These countries will probably work mainly to stabilize the situation and ensure the PA's stability, and avoid backing a specific candidate. The Gulf states are also expected to be involved, with Qatar promoting Hamas positions on election-related matters and the UAE's position likely influenced by Dahlan's interests. The debate on the question of PA

elections is expected to reawaken the discourse on internal Palestinian reconciliation, and Egypt and Qatar may take advantage of the new situation to renew contacts between the sides and promote an agreement that would also include an outline on elections. At the same time, Egypt and Jordan will steer clear of any move likely to result in a Hamas takeover of the West Bank. During the simulation, these questions yielded agreement on an inter-Arab meeting between the Palestinians, Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf states to discuss these issues, and on the establishment of a framework that could also lead processes related to Palestinian elections and unity. The discourse on unity and elections also raises new dilemmas regarding the position of the various international actors regarding dialogue with Hamas and under what conditions, and of their willingness to accept a potential unity or technocratic government supported both by Fatah and Hamas.

The scenario that emerged in the simulation saw Israel making clear that it does not interfere in the internal affairs of the PA, but opposing (even if not necessarily publicly) elections in the PA, especially in East Jerusalem. Israel will demand time to examine the PA under its new leadership, and to stabilize the situation, with an emphasis on the security issue, and will act against electoral processes and internal Palestinian unity. If serious international contacts do develop regarding the elections, Israel is likely to face demands from the international community for the participation of Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem in the elections. Israel agreed to this in the past, in accordance with the outline adopted in the Oslo Accords, but the current government will find it difficult to do the same. The question of Barghouti's release may also resurface, both in the domestic Palestinian discourse and perhaps in the international one, as well. The simulation suggested an option whereby Israel would hand Barghouti over to Jordan as the first stage in his political comeback, but neither Israel, nor the PA or Jordan are likely to be enthusiastic about such a move. The unification of various elements in Fatah under Barghouti's leadership as an agreed candidate will increase pressure for his release.

2. De-escalation and stabilization: The simulation drew up various scenarios of escalation, including tensions on the Temple Mount/Al-Haram al-Sharif; clashes between settlers and Palestinians at Joseph's Tomb, with Israeli politicians possibly barricading themselves in the tomb compound; clashes between IDF soldiers and armed Palestinians in the Dheisheh refugee camp and exchanges of fire between IDF soldiers and PA security forces; clashes between different Fatah factions; and the spillover of events into the Gaza Strip. Other developments included the impact of the events on the domestic arena in Jordan, mass demonstrations and calls by parliamentarians to sever relations with Israel.

The escalation on the ground exposed the depth of tension between Israel's security establishment and senior political figures in the Religious Zionism party, who hold key positions in government. While the defense establishment is expected to push for stability, strengthening the PA, and cooperating with international actors to promote a lull in violence, Smotrich and Ben-Gvir are likely to back provocateurs who stir up tensions, hope for the collapse of the PA, and vehemently oppose international political efforts. Prime Minister Netanyahu is in the middle, having to balance the demands of the political-security echelons and the political ones.

The simulation raised questions about the implications of the political change in Israel, and its impact on the basic assumptions underpinning traditional Israeli policy. Under Netanyahu, Israel sought to maintain the status quo of a stable PA, and security, economic and civilian cooperation with the PA, but senior players in the new coalition appear to be challenging this approach, casting doubts on the sustainability of this policy. **Israelis who served over the years as "spoilers" and agents of chaos on the ground are now inside the system** with the support of government ministers. The question arises whether a scenario of escalation and chaos will serve these forces, and whether they seek to advance it or are afraid of its outcome.

In light of these developments, international actors are expected to increase their involvement in a bid to ease tensions. These efforts will focus on de-escalation and countering controversial measures designed to increase tensions, such as Israeli moves toward annexation, increased friction in Area C, and violation of the status quo on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. A significant escalation could also generate initiatives to deploy international forces at certain hotspots in the territories. International efforts are expected to contend with powerful forces on the ground pushing for escalation and deterioration, and the development of peak dangerous dynamics.

3. Regional and international involvement: The simulation indicated a possible change in the attitude of various elements in the international community towards the Israeli-Palestinian arena, and an increase in international attention to the conflict, after years of its low prioritization. Instability, fear of escalation, and dramatic changes in the arena could encourage increased international involvement. At the same time, given the various developments presented in the simulation scenario, tensions may emerge over the focus of international efforts. Will these focus on measures to calm tensions and violence and prevent escalation, including moves to ensure stability and governance in the PA and promoting democratic processes - or on a broader political strategy of consolidating a political horizon and paving the way for a two-state solution.

The simulation pointed to expectations of a major US role in such a scenario. The Biden Administration has not given high priority to the Palestinian issue, its attention diverted to other global theaters, but given the conditions presented in the simulation, it is expected to exert its weight. The administration will emphasize the need for stability and calm, and focus its efforts on these goals, along with declarations of a future two-state vision and aspirations for elections and democracy in the PA. The administration will act on this issue in coordination with regional players, primarily Egypt and Jordan, and with the EU (unlike the Trump Administration, which operated in the conflict arena without coordination with the Europeans). The administration could also demand that Israel cooperate in diplomatic efforts on the Palestinian issue in order to allow more leeway on the Iranian issue.

Although the EU is perceived as a relatively weak player in the Israeli-Palestinian space, reluctant to use carrots and sticks and curtailed by divisions among its member countries, it is expected to play a role in a scenario of dramatic change in the PA, among other things in light of the extensive economic aid with which it provides the PA. The Europeans are expected to demand that the PA hold democratic elections as soon as possible, and improve the operations of

PA institutions and apparatuses, while demanding that Israel allow elections to be held in East Jerusalem and freeze unilateral measures in Area C and East Jerusalem. The EU could also try to take advantage of the crisis to renew its 2013 proposal granting Israel and a future Palestinian state "Special Privileged Partnership" status as an incentive to promote peace. The simulation exercise also exposed **the ongoing lack of an effective international mechanism to lead a political process between the sides**. The Quartet Group, established in 2002, which included the United States, Russia, the UN and the European Union, has been dysfunctional for many years and is largely irrelevant against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine. Restoring the Palestinian issue to the international agenda may prompt discussion of changing the composition of the Quartet or creating a new mechanism that will include regional actors.

At the regional level, Egypt and Jordan are expected to lead the management of the crisis. Both maintain strong ties with the PA and assist in mediation efforts between Israel and the Palestinians, with Egypt focusing on the Gaza Strip and Jordan playing an important role on the issue of Jerusalem's holy sites. Egypt has also led the reconciliation efforts between Fatah and Hamas over the years. In the event of Mahmoud Abbas' departure, it is expected to renew efforts in this direction in order to promote agreements on holding elections and on the feasibility of a unity or technocratic government. The Egyptians are unlikely to pressure the PA to hold immediate elections nor to intervene in the question of the identity of Mahmoud Abbas' successor, but it will seek to prevent a Hamas takeover of the PA. Jordan is also expected to play a role in these developments. Presumably, along with its efforts within the Palestinian arena, it will demand a halt to unilateral Israeli moves in the territories and the creation of a political horizon that will make it possible to strengthen the PA.

In the "day after Abbas" scenario, regional involvement could shift gears and an agreed Arab steering committee might be established to lead a process of elections and reconciliation in the PA. Potential participants include Egypt and Jordan, and Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. This committee could also lead election oversight with assistance from other international bodies, including the EU and the Carter Center. Mahmoud Abbas' departure from the arena could ease tensions between the Palestinian and Emirati leaderships, but Dahlan's presence in the UAE will continue to influence the attitude of PA leaders towards the UAE. Dahlan is not expected to participate in elections if they are held shortly after Abbas' death, but he will continue to monitor events, support another candidate, and increase involvement in preparation for running next time. Saudi Arabia is also portrayed as an important player in the arena, with significant cards that could influence developments. A revival of the Palestinian issue is also expected to generate discussion of a deal with Saudi Arabia that will include normalization with Israel in exchange for American promises of military aid and dealing with Iran, and the renewal of the Arab Peace Initiative.

4. *Outlining the framework of Israel-PA relations under the new conditions:* The simulation discussed prospects of turning the crisis in the Israeli-Palestinian arena into an opportunity for international and regional efforts to establish a new framework of understandings between Israel and the PA. Such an outline could include several pillars: a security pillar ratifying and strengthening security coordination between the sides, enhancing PA governance, and restraining

Israeli operations within Area A; A political pillar ratifying existing agreements, stopping unilateral Israeli steps on the ground, and finding an agreed-upon route for renewing political long-term negotiations, perhaps within the framework of the principles of the Arab Peace Initiative; An economic pillar of significant steps to strengthen the Palestinian economy, with the assistance of countries in the region, and the promotion of various projects, including the development of the Gaza Marine gas field. Additional measures will focus on the internal Palestinian arena, including the building and strengthening of PA institutions, creating an infrastructure for a future state, increasing democratization in the PA, and promoting internal Palestinian reconciliation. A comprehensive process that links these components, as part of preparations for the day after Abbas, could also re-examine the international position regarding internal Palestinian reconciliation, and discuss conditions required for recognizing a Palestinian unity government.

Under Mahmoud Abbas, Palestinian public opinion developed mistrust of the two-state solution and the peace process, and opposition to continued security and civilian coordination with Israel. The post-Abbas leadership will have to confront this attitude, and will find it difficult to maintain Abbas' political path without showing achievements that will help persuade and mobilize public opinion in this regard.

In conclusion, the scenario of the day after Abbas points to dangers and threats, but also to opportunities. On the one hand, Mahmoud Abbas' departure from the arena could generate chaos, including the collapse of the PA (partially or completely), a harsh internal struggle between armed groups, instability, and great potential for escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian arena. The combination of this scenario with the new political reality in Israel, and the new Israeli government's policy, raises serious concerns over a "perfect storm". The PA's weakness and potential decentralization of its power, together with the desire of right-wing elements in Israel's government to bring about the collapse and dismantling of the PA, are liable to promote dangerous fragmentation of the West Bank. On the other hand, under certain conditions, Abbas' departure could also dislodge the ongoing stagnation in this arena, create opportunities both for the internal Palestinian political arena and the Israeli-Palestinian political arena, and increase regional and international involvement. The simulation brought up a series of questions and issues that will surface the day after Abbas, regarding the possibility of holding elections in the PA and under what conditions, escalation on the ground, the role of various regional and international actors, and the implications for diplomatic efforts in the arena. This scenario foresees a realignment of the various actors and a new reality in the Palestinian arena.

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