

The Palestinian Authority Since October 2023: Flawed Expectations and Failed Leadership

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ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes the Palestinian Authority's (PA) persistence in adhering to a two-state solution framework despite Israel's genocidal campaign in Gaza, expanding settler-colonial encroachments, and the degradation of Palestinian institutions in the West Bank. It explores how entrenched clientelism, economic dependencies, and a desire to preserve existing power structures underlie the PA's reluctance to rethink its approach. As Israeli and international actors abandon former parameters of engagement, the PA's leadership responds by consolidating authority through a closed circle of loyalists rather than confronting the new realities on the ground. Ultimately, the PA's silence, inaction, and institutional entrenchment foreclose any meaningful political renewal, leaving it incapable of advancing Palestinian aspirations at this critical historical juncture.

KEYWORDS

Palestinian Authority; genocide; Gaza; settler colonialism; clientelism; Oslo Accords; two-state framework

UNDER THE OVERSIGHT OF THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY (PA), 2024 was not only the bloodiest year for Palestinians in the West Bank, where the PA nominally governs most Palestinians, but also one of its most destructive since the 1948 Nakba. Between October 2023 and October 2024, the West Bank saw the highest number of Palestinians killed by Israeli military forces and settlers since the occupation began in 1967.¹ Israeli bulldozers razed critical infrastructure, utilities, and public facilities, particularly in the northern regions. During this time, Israel accelerated its settler-colonial expansion, appropriating land, undertaking large infrastructural projects, and supporting a rapidly growing settler population.² Meanwhile, in Gaza, Israel's unfolding genocidal campaign is amassing a staggering human toll and eradicating virtually all signs of economic vitality, institutional governance, and basic infrastructural continuity.³

Israel's systematic devastation and unchecked settler-colonial dominance across the West Bank have placed the PA, which styles itself as the cornerstone of a future Palestinian state, on perilous ground. Since October 2023, Israel has increasingly threatened to dismantle the PA, even targeting institutions previously seen as serving Israeli security interests and facilitating the settler colonization of the West Bank.⁴ In response, PA leaders have remained silent on the genocide in Gaza and worsening Israeli violence across the West Bank. Instead, they have persisted in upholding the two-state framework and the idea of a negotiated settlement with Israel, despite the glaring reality that the two-state framework and peace talks are obsolete.⁵ Beneath their silence and inaction, one must ask what drives PA leaders to maintain their antiquated stance and whether it has changed in any meaningful way since October 2023.

Foundations of the PA's Persistence

The PA's persistent position toward Israel likely results from multiple calculations that are not solely political.⁶ A complex matrix of economic interests, institutional self-preservation, and entrenched clientelist networks reinforces its continued compliance. The PA has emerged as a major employer of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, directly employing more than 200,000 individuals and indirectly supporting 750,000.⁷ Seventy-five percent of its budget covers wages and social welfare payments, while nearly 30 percent of Palestinian economic activity can be traced to PA expenditure.⁸ This arrangement fosters material dependency on the PA and supports broad clientelist networks that secure loyalty not only from declared supporters, but also from those who may privately doubt or oppose PA policies.⁹ Moreover, the PA has established various funding mechanisms, including allocations to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the PA Presidential Office, that remain tightly controlled by its top leadership—an approach that rewards loyalty and discourages dissent. As such, the PA's adherence to a discredited political framework reflects the tangible economic interests and entrenched power structures that have solidified with the Oslo Accords and subsequent arrangements with Israel.¹⁰

From the PA's perspective, current institutions and their associated material benefits are the fruits of a historical struggle.¹¹ Changing course or embracing alternative political paradigms could redistribute influence and resources to rival factions that the current leadership considers untrustworthy or hostile, such as Hamas or Islamic Jihad. Moreover, PA elites cherish the symbolic trappings of statehood. They hold official titles, issue diplomatic communiqués, and enjoy the privileges of diplomatic travel and preferential tax treatment. High-profile international visits, such as Mahmoud Abbas's June 2023 trip to China, portrayed by PA supporters as historic, reinforce the illusion that the PA wields genuine sovereignty.¹² Within Ramallah's government offices, staff carry out activities that somewhat mimic functional state operations, constructing a parallel reality that obscures ongoing territorial fragmentation, escalating settler-colonial encroachments, and the genocide in Gaza.¹³

Compounding these considerations is the PA's entrenched belief that Israel and its Western allies cannot afford to let the PA collapse. PA leaders assume that when geopolitical conditions shift, as they inevitably must, both donors and Israel will need the PA again. They believe it will serve as a political intermediary in Gaza or help stabilize the West Bank, ensuring that Israel's interests and the donors' objectives remain intact. In the minds of PA officials, the PA is the only credible agent capable of quickly reactivating governance, providing a measure of stability, and managing Palestinian affairs to the benefit of external stakeholders. In their view, Israel's current hostility toward the PA represents reluctance rather than a fundamental policy transformation, and international actors, wary of the unknown, will eventually return to supporting and engaging with the PA. This position is further reinforced by the intermittent yet tangible donor support the PA continues to receive since October 2023—primarily from the United States and the European Union, but also from Israel. For example, in December 2024, the US requested that Israel enhance the PA's security apparatus and facilitate the movement of security assets between West Bank cities, with which Israel reportedly complied.¹⁴

Three Flawed Expectations

In placing its hopes on a future shift by Israel and its Western allies, the PA has essentially engaged in a calculated waiting game since October 2023, building its approach around three

core expectations. The first of these was that Israel's retaliation in Gaza would be both devastating and finite, eventually necessitating some form of restored governance in Gaza that the PA would assume. This was despite the fact that Israeli rhetoric in the first days after October 7, in addition to its extensive bombardment of Gaza that resulted in tens of thousands of deaths within a matter of weeks, made it plain that Israel intended to engage in an unrestricted campaign of genocide and ethnic cleansing exceeding previous levels of brutality.¹⁵

In the days and weeks following October 7, Israeli occupation forces intensified their repressive measures in the West Bank. Widespread arrests, detentions, torture, tighter restrictions on freedom of movement, including the closure of borders with Jordan, and unbridled settler violence all indicated that Israel had little hesitation about employing the most extreme methods.¹⁶ The PA, however, misjudged not only the duration of this offensive, but also the resilience of armed resistance in Gaza and the extent to which Israel intended to uproot every dimension of life there. As the genocidal assault continued and Palestinian resistance refused to yield, it became increasingly difficult for the PA to devise a coherent response that could safeguard its own political and institutional position.

A second expectation involved the extent to which Israel would undermine the PA's financial, economic, and political foundations. While PA officials did not realistically anticipate that Israel, after potentially dismantling Hamas's grip in Gaza, would immediately invite them to fill any resulting power vacuum, they did assume that Israel and its allies would refrain from entirely discrediting the PA. The leadership believed Israel would view a functioning PA as a useful mechanism to prevent chaos and might even shore up the PA's position to maintain a measure of stability during a full-scale offensive on Gaza. Instead, Israel pursued a dual strategy: genocidal destruction in Gaza accompanied by systematic political and economic warfare against the West Bank, eroding all forms of Palestinian representation and undermining any credibility the PA might have had as a prospective partner.

Israeli leaders appear to have concluded that this moment offers a historic opportunity to consolidate and accelerate their settler-colonial expansion in the West Bank, a project that demands the elimination of any semblance of Palestinian national institutions, including the PA itself. Although the PA facilitates Israeli security interests and, as many argue, abets its settler-colonial expansion, Israeli decision-makers have moved toward a model of governance focused solely on service provision without even the hollow symbols of Palestinian nationhood.¹⁷ In the process, they sanctioned the PA, filed lawsuits against it in Israeli courts, withheld and appropriated Palestinian tax revenues, and revoked previously granted travel and trade privileges for PA officials.¹⁸

The third expectation hinged on the belief that donor states would not fully align themselves with Israeli positions. The PA believed that at some point, key international actors would moderate their stance, exert pressure on Israel, or at least commit aid packages without onerous preconditions.¹⁹ These assumptions proved hollow. Influential European donors, among others, rapidly adopted Israeli narratives and intensified anti-Palestinian rhetoric. Under this pressure, they coerced the PA into curtailing even rhetorical challenges to Israel's policies in Gaza and the West Bank.²⁰ Aid packages, once intended as financial lifelines, were transformed into instruments of punishment; both PA and non-PA aid were withheld, scrutinized, and conditioned upon compliance with new standards.²¹ Even when the PA tottered on the brink of financial collapse in mid-2024, the EU imposed a memorandum of understanding tying the release of funds to stringent key performance indicators.²² Rather than acting as a check on Israeli aggression, donors and many in the international community echoed the EU's position, rendering the PA more isolated than ever.

Structural Power Plays

Faced with unprecedented external pressures, existential threats, and the failure of their waiting game strategy, since October 2023, PA leaders have attempted to reassert political and institutional control through a series of top-down, leader-centric interventions. In March 2024, Mohammad Mustafa replaced the long-serving Mohammad Shtayyeh as prime minister, and other prominent ministers, including Shukri Bishara (finance) and Riyad al-Maliki (foreign affairs), were similarly removed.²³ In December 2024, Abbas appointed his loyalist, Rawhi Fattouh, chairman of the Palestinian National Council (PNC), to serve as interim PA president should Abbas become incapacitated before new elections could be held.²⁴

This is part of a longer-term strategy to consolidate his inner circle. Over the past decade, Abbas has deliberately placed trusted confidants in pivotal roles, gradually marginalizing influential Fatah and PLO figures from senior executive positions. For instance, in 2022, he elevated Hussein al-Sheikh, whose appointment was contentious within Fatah and PLO circles, to PLO Secretary-General shortly after al-Sheikh joined the PLO Executive Committee.²⁵ Through these selections, Abbas has sought to maintain his carefully structured institutional blueprint of Palestinian governance, offering donors an appearance of stability and continuity even as the broader political landscape moves further away from any credible path to sovereignty.

Yet Abbas's attempts to preserve his blueprint for Palestinian governance are inadvertently set to produce greater uncertainty and to further alienate the PA from the Palestinians, especially as it continues to conspicuously remain silent on the genocide in Gaza. In fact, Mustafa's first public outreach since assuming the premiership came in the form of an op-ed article in the *Washington Post*, one that made the case for the PA's return to Gaza not by appealing to Palestinians themselves, but rather to Western audiences and donors.²⁶

Beyond the PA's rapidly diminishing popular appeal, Abbas's maneuvers are binding the PA and PLO in ways that sustain, rather than resolve, the tensions embedded between them. Entrusting the head of the PNC, a PLO institution, with responsibilities that PA law assigns to the speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council, a role held by Aziz Dweik of Hamas since 2006 and obtained through national elections, underscores the permanency of division between Fatah and Hamas. The appointment of Mustafa, a member of the PLO Executive Committee, as prime minister further blurs the boundaries between PA and PLO bodies. These developments coincide with mounting frustration among members of Fatah's Central Committee, who have voiced dissatisfaction with Abbas's choices.²⁷ Their grievances are likely to erupt once Abbas is no longer at the helm or becomes significantly weakened. In this light, Abbas's actions may well prepare the post-Abbas landscape for intensifying factional rivalries, internal fragmentation, and a deepening deficit of popular legitimacy.

Compounding this governance crisis is the severe erosion of the PLO's historical role as an inclusive, representative institution. Under Abbas's direction, efforts to revive or reform the PLO have been dismissed as foreign conspiracies or deemed illegitimate.²⁸ Instead, PLO influence now revolves almost exclusively around unwavering loyalty to Abbas's stagnant vision. Prospective entrants to the PLO Executive Committee or other high-ranking PLO councils are compelled to conform fully to his directives. Such rigidity extinguishes any potential dynamism that a revitalized PLO might have introduced into a Palestinian political sphere dominated by a weakened PA, a genocidal onslaught in Gaza, and a West Bank landscape subjected to relentless settler colonization.

In the meantime, Abbas's new prime minister has attempted to replicate the conditions of the Salam Fayyad era, when a massive international donor effort, amounting to tens of billions of dollars, helped rebuild the West Bank following the second intifada.²⁹ Current circumstances, however, suggest that such a strategy is unlikely to succeed in Gaza or the West Bank. Even if donors were to support reconstruction efforts, there is no guarantee that the PA would occupy a central role, particularly given Israel's vocal resistance and Donald Trump's second administration in the United States. If his first term is any indication, Trump's presidency would prove detrimental to the PA and to Palestinians more broadly.

Conclusion

In the face of staggering Israeli violence, a genocidal campaign in Gaza, relentless settlement expansion, and the effective erasure of any meaningful political horizon, Palestinian leadership under the PA has responded not with innovation, but with silence and retrenchment. Rather than rising to the challenge of unprecedented crisis, the PA's entrenched elites have clung to a discredited framework, hollowed out their institutions through clientelism and arbitrary decrees, and shuttered any meaningful avenue for inclusive political renewal. What remains is a fragile edifice of personal loyalties and illusions of authority, incapable of confronting the reality that its erstwhile partners and sponsors have abandoned the very premise on which the PA was founded.

The Oslo process is long gone, and the United States, its original patron, has all but relinquished even the façade of advocacy, while new colonial governance proposals reminiscent of the Trump administration's so-called Peace to Prosperity plan in 2020, are taking shape.³⁰ The tragedy is not simply the PA's failure to avert the collapse of its mission, or Israel's unabated settler colonization of Palestine, but its reluctance to recognize that a different future, one that truly represents Palestinian aspirations, will require courage, a vision, and a reckoning that it has shown no willingness to embrace.

About the Author

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