



The True Obstacles to a Palestinian State

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There's a new joke making the rounds in Israel, concerning the Biden administration's Mideast policy. The punchline is that the White House is worried about a "two state solution"—just the wrong one. That is, rather than figuring out how to make real, lasting peace between Israel and "Palestine," Washington, D.C., is preoccupied with pacifying two other states: Michigan and Arizona.

Like all such anecdotes, this one has a ring of truth to it. The Biden administration, facing an increasingly tough re-election battle this fall, is tacking left in its approach to Israel, hoping to mollify voters angered by its support of Israel's current war against Hamas in the Gaza Strip. In the process, President Joe Biden and his supporters have broken with Israel's government in all sorts of very public and concerning ways, from undercutting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu by hosting his main political rival in Washington for an unsanctioned visit to calling for Netanyahu himself to step down. The White House has also, in a clear nod to calls from its activist left, begun weighing options for the near term recognition of Palestinian state. (Most recently, the two sides have engaged in a very public dust-up over America's failure to block a controversial U.N. Security Council resolution that calls for a ceasefire without mentioning Israeli hostages.)

One the one hand, this is understandable. All politics is local, after all, and Team Biden needs to be responsive to its constituents if it hopes to win re-election in November. On the other, however, it is deeply myopic because it gives little serious thought to what it might actually take to build a viable "day after" solution for the Palestinian people.

Here, three elements in particular stand out.

The first is security. Nearly six months on, the carnage carried out by Hamas on Oct. 7 continues to reverberate throughout Israeli society. The physical safety and psychological well-being of the country's southern communities demand a new security paradigm that keeps them better protected. This is why Israel's government has begun to create a demilitarized buffer zone inside Gaza to insulate the "Gaza envelope" (as Israeli districts adjacent to the Strip are known) from future cross-border violence. And because that buffer zone will be needed indefinitely, Israel is now gearing up for a period of protracted military administration—something neither it nor the Palestinians truly want. Only a better solution that thoroughly safeguards Israel's security can avoid a new, open-ended military occupation of the Gaza Strip.

The second is economic. Under the parallel misrule of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Hamas, the Palestinian Territories have suffered from a distinct "failure to thrive" in recent years. In both the West Bank and Gaza, governing authorities have abetted widespread corruption while consistently failing to build a sustainable indigenous economy. Instead, they have relied heavily on international aid, as well as the earnings of the more than 110,000 Palestinians with permits for work in Israel. Post-Oct. 7, however, that latter revenue stream has become a thing of the past, leading to rising joblessness and economic instability among the Palestinians. Nor is it liable to return any time soon, since Israel—in an effort to revitalize its own economy—is now increasingly turning to other, more reliable sources for workers. All of which leaves the Palestinians without the basic building block of viable statehood: a sustainable economy. This state of affairs will need to be remedied if any future Palestinian entity is to survive, let alone thrive.

The third element is political. As Western conversations have turned to discussions of post-war governance, they have naturally focused on the possibility that the Palestinian Authority (PA), which already administers the West Bank, could assume responsibility for the Gaza Strip as well. But, after decades of shoddy management, the PA is thoroughly discredited among Palestinians themselves. In its most recent poll, the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, a respected pollster headquartered in Ramallah, found that nearly two-thirds of respondents now want a new government not under control of PA chair Mahmoud Abbas, and even more favor the "dissolution" of the PA altogether.

This unpopularity helps explain why Palestinians writ large continue to support Hamas, in spite of the collective tragedy the group has inflicted upon them over the past half-year. In the same survey, 64 percent of West Bankers said the Islamist faction should remain in control of Gaza. In the Strip itself, 52 percent of people still believe the same thing. Clearly, if the Palestinians are to transition beyond Hamas—a core Israeli requirement for any post-war scenario—they will also need to move beyond the Palestinian Authority, at least in its current form.

Cumulatively, these factors will help determine what lies ahead for the Palestinians. But if Team Biden ignores them in favor of quick fixes, or worse still, empty pandering to its constituents, it will only end up perpetuating their misery.