

# **MAHMOUD ABBAS HOLOCAUST CONTROVERSY SPOTLIGHTS DEEP DISILLUSION WITH PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY**

Thirty years after the Oslo Accords, Palestinians question whether the pseudo-government born from the peace process can — and should — survive.



[Alice Speri](#)

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**MAHMOUD ABBAS, THE** usually low-profile president of the Palestinian Authority, was widely condemned around the world this week, including [by prominent Palestinian intellectuals](#), after making [antisemitic comments](#) about the Holocaust in a televised speech to his party last month. While Abbas's words and actions rarely command significant international attention, the incident put a spotlight on his deep unpopularity among Palestinians, some [73 percent](#) of whom want him gone, and their growing disillusionment with the PA.

Abbas, whose spokesperson [disputed](#) that his remarks were antisemitic, was one of the architects of the Oslo peace process, which commenced with a historic handshake between Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on the White House lawn 30 years ago this week. Oslo has [long been dead](#) to [Palestinians](#), whose hopes in the statehood promised to them under the deal collapsed years ago.

Now, faced with the most far-right extremist Israeli government to date, escalating settler and military violence that have laid bare the PA's inability to protect its people, and Abbas's increasingly authoritarian rule, many Palestinians have also begun to question the future of Oslo's most enduring legacy: the PA itself. As Palestinians look with growing concern to an unclear succession path following Abbas, who is 87 and has ruled since shortly Arafat died in 2004, they are also asking whether the institution itself can — or should — survive a political moment so profoundly distant from that of its establishment.

“There's a very big question mark about the sustainability of the Palestinian Authority,” said Ammar Dwaik, director of the Independent Commission for Human Rights, Palestine's official rights ombudsman.

It was a question I heard from many Palestinians across class, generation, and political allegiance during a trip to the occupied West Bank earlier this year.

“What’s the point of the PA?” asked Ehab Bseiso, a former minister of culture whom Abbas fired in 2021 after he publicly criticized Palestinian security forces’ [killing](#) of an outspoken critic of the PA. “What’s the point of having a PA if we still have expansion of settlements, incursions, killings, shootings, and so on? There’s nothing that the PA can offer. It’s been trapped in one function: maintaining order, condemning Israeli violations, addressing the international community. It doesn’t match the anger and frustration on the ground.”

Bseiso pointed to Abbas’s rule-by-decree governance, with no elections held in a generation and Parliament dissolved years ago. “The whole Palestinian political future is linked to, ‘What’s going to happen after Abbas is gone?’” Bseiso said. “That’s a failure in itself, because if we had institutions, this question wouldn’t have been emerging. In a healthy political system, one president goes and another comes. But we have no institutions, there is no Parliament, no elections for the last 18 years.”

The authority has become “irrelevant” to many Palestinians, echoed Mustafa Barghouti, a co-founder of the international boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement and secretary of the Palestinian National Initiative, a third party aiming to overcome the split between Hamas, which controls the Gaza Strip, and Fatah, Abbas’s party.

Abbas Zaki, a veteran Fatah member, put it more bluntly. “The PA is over, they are finished,” Zaki said. “We need to reorganize ourselves.”



Israeli forces use gas bombs against protesters at a demonstration marking the 30th anniversary of the Oslo Accords signed between Palestine and Israel, Gaza City, Gaza, on Sept. 13, 2023.

Photo: Ali Jadallah/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

# Subcontractors for the Occupation

The Palestinian Authority was established as part of the Oslo agreements as a transitional body to administer the territories Israel has illegally occupied since 1967: the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza. It was supposed to be a temporary arrangement until the contours of a sovereign Palestinian nation could be finalized in negotiations. That, of course, never happened. Instead, Israel has spent the last 30 years seizing control of most of the territory that was intended to constitute the basis for a Palestinian state. In the five years that Oslo set aside for negotiations, the population of settlers in the occupied territories more than [doubled](#), ballooning to some [700,000 today](#).

With prospects of a two-state solution all but vanished, so has the legitimacy of the Palestinian Authority itself. While Abbas is deeply unpopular, his potential successors [fare hardly better](#), a clear sign that the institution, more than the man himself, is the problem.

Still, even the PA's most outspoken critics stress that its failures must be understood in the context of an Israeli occupation of which the authority is but an extension. From the start, the PA had no real sovereignty or power. While a series of agreements technically gave it administrative and security control over 17 percent of the West Bank — the most densely populated areas known as Area A— Israeli forces frequently invade those lands, exposing the meaninglessness of those arrangements. Meanwhile, the PA has virtually no

control over the majority of the West Bank, what's known as Areas B and C.

The PA is charged with running the functions of local government — such as education, health care, trash collection, and policing — even though under international law, the occupying power is responsible for the care of the people under its control. Israel, meanwhile, controls all movements outside and within the West Bank, its natural resources, and its economy.

The Oslo agreements also resulted in one of the most fraught features of the authority's existence: its obligation to a deeply controversial security coordination with Israel. While PA officials need to coordinate with their Israeli counterparts to administer a host of services, including policing, the security coordination also sets up Palestinian security forces, trained and funded largely by the United States and European countries, to work with the Israeli military to suppress Palestinian resistance. That, in addition to the PA's inability to protect Palestinians against violence by the military and settlers, has deepened its delegitimization in the eyes of Palestinians.

At the same time, the authority's role as civic administrator has made it indispensable to maintaining a modicum of normalcy and services for the population. Crucially, the donor-funded PA has become the primary economic engine in Palestine,

employing at least 150,000 people in a bloated bureaucracy designed to inject liquidity in an otherwise strangled economy. (Some [942,000 Palestinians](#), a quarter of the population, are entirely dependent on PA salaries). But even those economic benefits are subject to Israel's whims. Israel collects taxes and tariffs from Palestinians and transfers them to the PA, frequently withholding funds to apply political pressure and leaving tens of thousands of people without income.

Against that backdrop, a growing number of Palestinians have come to view the PA as an enabler to their oppression rather than a legitimate representative of their political aspirations.

“The people look at it as a subcontractor,” said Shawan Jabarin, the director of the prominent Palestinian human rights organization Al-Haq, echoing a common refrain. “The PA, at the end of the day, is not an independent state, it’s still not a sovereign state. We don’t like to say that, for national reasons, not to harm them, but purely speaking, it is a subcontractor.”



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu chairs a weekly cabinet meeting at his office in Jerusalem on Aug. 27, 2023

Photo: Menahem Kahana/Pool Photo via AP



# The End of the PA

In Ramallah, the authority's de facto capital, foreign-sponsored ministry buildings bear the insignia and flags of a "State of Palestine." That statehood was recognized by an overwhelming majority of the United Nations' General Assembly in 2012, perhaps Abbas's greatest political accomplishment, but it does not exist in practice.

In fact, mostly powerless at home, the PA's leadership has staked its hopes in international forums and mechanisms, including bids to bring Israeli crimes before both the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice. It's a strategy that has slowly earned Palestinians global solidarity while also angering Israeli officials, who dubbed the efforts "diplomatic terrorism." But it also put the fate of Palestinians in the hands of fickle global trends and left many of them feeling alienated by efforts that have no real impact on their daily lives.

"We cared more about the outside. We worked so hard in the international arena to get some recognition and support," said Zaki, the Fatah veteran. "Now we're shifting, we're turning inside. We need a plan to protect our people and help people confront the settlers. We need to focus on national unity and reorganizing the Palestinian household."

He and others pointed to the current moment in Israeli politics, with the country's most extremist government to date — headed by third-time Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in coalition with some of the country's most far-right parties — attacking its institutions and enflaming internal divisions, as one of great danger but also of opportunity for Palestinians. "The big difference between the Israeli governments of the last

20, 30 years is that some of them were working under the table, and this one is working in front of the whole world,” Mousa Hadid, the former mayor of Ramallah, told me. “This government will take us to a place that the whole world must stop and start thinking about.”

Israeli leaders have relied on the PA for the last 30 years, understanding the strategic need for maintaining its administrative role and security cooperation. Yet the current Israeli government has shown little interest in its survival. Instead, the country’s leadership has made no secret of its disdain for the PA. Finance minister Bezalel Smotrich, for instance, has called on Israel to “[work towards its collapse](#).”

Whether that will happen or not, many Palestinians have already begun to think about a future not only after Abbas, but also with leadership and a political process that is more representative of their aspirations. With some 70 percent of the population [younger than Oslo](#), many Palestinians are also pushing for different goals and frameworks than those laid out by the agreements.

“I do believe our goal as Palestinians should not only be fighting the occupation, I think we should call for ending and bringing down the whole system of apartheid and racial discrimination in the whole of Palestine,” said Barghouti, the Palestinian National Initiative secretary. “They’re killing the two-state solution? We can have a one-state solution. But we will not live as slaves in a system of apartheid.”