

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

WEBINAR

PALESTINIAN POLITICS AND SOCIETY AFTER THE WAR

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 5 2024

MODERATOR: JOYCE KARAM
Senior News Editor, Al-Monitor

TAHANI MUSTAFA
Senior Analyst, Palestine, International Crisis Group

KHALIL SHIKAKI
Professor of Political Science and Director, Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research

SHIBLEY TELHAMI
Nonresident Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy, Center for Middle East Policy, Brookings

* * * * *

KARAM: Good morning, everyone, and welcome to this Brookings webinar on Palestinian politics. I'm Joyce Karam, senior news editor at Al-Monitor, and I'm delighted to be moderating this panel with such distinguished groups of scholars and academics on Palestinian affairs. Joining us from Ramallah is Doctor Khalil Shikaki. He's a professor of political science and director of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research. Also with us is Tahani Mustafa. She is a senior analyst at the International Crisis Group. She's joining us from London. And she focuses in her work on Palestinian affairs, including issues related to development and, governance. Last but not least, we have with us, Dr. Shibley Telhami, who's senior fellow at the Foreign Policy program here at Brookings and the Anwar Sadat professor for peace and development at the University of Maryland. Great to, to have you, to have you with us this morning. We meet four months after the October 7th attacks. And in the midst of the Gaza war, at least 27,000 Palestinians, 1,200 Israelis have been killed. Nearly 80% of the Gaza population is internally displaced. The reality is bearing resemblance with the Palestinian Nakba of 1948. How will Palestinian politics and society emerge from this? That's a question I will discuss with our panelists in the hour that we have. If you're in the audience with a question submitted to us via Twitter-X using hashtag Palestinian politics, or by mailing it to events@brookings.edu. So without further ado, I'm going to start, with doctor. Shikaki, can you tell us how was the devastation, how was the carnage and that we're seeing in Gaza transforming Palestinian society? Where you are, in Ramallah, your last poll from December showed that Hamas, support is is rising, especially in the West Bank and slightly in Gaza. So give us a view from where you are on where things, stand at the moment.

SHIKAKI: Thank you, Joyce, and good to be with you. There is no doubt that this is, a turning point in Palestinian politics. Yes, there is indeed considerable support for Hamas in the West Bank compared to where Hamas stood before the war. Gazans are a lot more critical of Hamas. So support, has not really risen much. In Gaza, there is much greater questioning of Hamas's actions in the Gaza Strip today than in the West Bank. The West Bank is very, very tolerant of what Hamas has done, and very supportive, in fact, of what it did. And the support for Hamas has increased more than three times than what it was before. Still, both in the West Bank and Gaza, there is no majority support for Hamas. The, this is obviously compared to the other political faction in Palestinian politics, which is the Palestinian Authority and Fatah and President Abbas, who have suffered a significant loss of trust and credibility among the Palestinians. The Palestinian public seems to think that the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian leadership is completely absent, having almost no role whatsoever in what is currently going on. Support, the demand for Abbas' resignation in the West Bank, has risen to more than 90%, 92% in our survey. Support for Fatah has gone down by

almost half. The demand, the perception that the Palestinian Authority is becoming a burden on the Palestinian people has never been as high as it is today. So, the domestic balance of power is obviously changing considerably. We've seen this before, though, and usually during wars between Hamas and Israel, we do see something similar to that. Things do revert back to where they were before, six months, three months, nine months down the road. Obviously, we don't know what is going to happen this time, but this could happen here as well. We do see also significant support for militancy among the Palestinian public. This is something that we started to see, particularly since the formation of the current Israeli government, more than a year ago. This is particularly true in the West Bank. The West Bank has traditionally been much less willing to support use of force or violence against Israelis. Now, based on our latest survey, almost 70% now support violence. Before the war, the level of support for violence was slightly more than 50%. Before the formation of the current Israeli government -- all these figures are just for the West Bank -- the support for violence before the formation of the government was less than 40%. So clearly, these are changes. The support for, for violence is not just because of the settler violence and because of the formation of extreme governmental, because of exposure to violence in Gaza, but also because the Palestinian Authority isn't doing much to protect the civilians who live, not in Gaza, but in the West Bank, in area B, towns and villages in area B that are vulnerable to settler violence. When people see that the Palestinian Authority is unable to send police to protect them, they demand the formation of armed groups to stand up to the settlers. They have lost the hope that the Palestinian Authority will be able to protect them, or that Israeli army will stop the settlers.

KARAM: Tahani, that's a very dire picture that, Dr. Shikaki pointed to in the West Bank, rise of militancy, lack of support for the Palestinian Authority. Just, the rise in settlers' attack. How much of this is a question of failure of governance on the part of the Palestinian Authority? How much of this is a far-right Israeli government that we've had in power now for, for over a year?

MUSTAFA: Thank you. So I think a couple of things that could be taken away from the events of October the 7th. The first is that it has unraveled a lot of the fallacies of the post-Oslo dispensation, that this whole discourse around it concerning a two-state solution was more of a convenient fiction, and I don't think that holds any truer today than it did before. It's also shown us that the Palestinian self-governing structures that evolved since Oslo, are neither viable in the longer term nor do they serve the interests of the Palestinians. You know, they've, in effect, produced what can be described as chaos, political vacuum and have undermined the possibility of any longer-term solutions. Leaving what I think, doctor, sorry, Dr. Khalil just

described as as, you know, Palestinians having ultimately very little hope for the future. And, you know, since the 7th of October, we've seen those issues kind of become more pressing, right? Especially the factors that have blocked Palestinian political renewal. So, you know, I think Dr. Dr. Khalil did a very good job in terms of outlining a lot of those issues in terms of the way that, again, the PA has primarily served Israeli security interests, which has ramped up support for armed resistance and violence because Palestinians feel completely defenseless in the face of Israeli settler violence, as well as raids and incursions and targeted assassinations from its security forces. You know, we've, we've seen the way that the PA and Israel have employed a multitude of ways in the past to keep Palestinians acquiescent, but that, those mechanisms were no longer viable considering the economic crisis. Now that the PA finds itself under, you know, the leadership of Fatah and the PA have evolved into what can be described as a comfort or elite. By their personal financial interests are very much tied to the socio-political and economic structures of the PA, to the detriment of broader Palestinian national interest. We've seen the way that Mahmoud Abbas, over the last decade has managed to centralize power in the hands of both himself and his two lieutenants, Majed Farajand Hussein al-Sheikh. You know, Abbas has clung to power, and effectively undermined, if not actively destroyed, all legitimate institutional avenues for deciding his successor, making him, I guess you could say, the only pole holding up the tent. But in doing so, he's also undermined governance in the West Bank and plunged the PA into the political and economic crisis that Dr. Khalil was just describing, leaving it devoid of legitimacy, to the point where it is now actively loathed among Palestinians, which is what I think these opinion polls have been reflecting not just over the last month, but for the last, I think, three years now, since May 2021, where we really start to see some level of mobilization in the West Bank after what with, you know, for the first time, the opportunity that Palestinians saw since 2006 for renewal, which was the the announcement of elections and their later cancellation. And worse yet, you're seeing a lot of Palestinians seeing Abbas and the PA as completely irrelevant. Not only prior to the 7th of October, but even more so now, considering that they have failed to be proactive, not just in terms of creating a united leadership that's needed in order to push for things like a cease-fire, relief to Gaza, trying to mitigate some of the effects of violence that we're seeing in the West Bank, the collective punishment that we've seen wrought on the West Bank, a population of 3.2 million, that had nothing to do with the events of October the 7th that have been subject to what is effectively an economic siege. And all the while, the only people the PA have been actually really actively speaking to, is the US. I mean, even even regional mediators have complained that it's not that the PA has been marginalized or that they haven't been offered a seat at the table, it's that they fail to be proactive. They haven't really been, you know, in terms of any diplomatic effort, serious in pursuing any

diplomatic effort to to push for either a ceasefire or to mitigate, sorry, some of the violence we're seeing in the West Bank. And against that backdrop, not only are we seeing the fact that, you know, for better or worse, Hamas is still very much there, still very much part of the political landscape, but as Dr. Khalil just described, you know, that the balance of power has tilted in their favor. You're seeing their support triple in places like the West Bank, Gaza. I think it's still very premature to determine, but Hamas still remains is the only organized alternative to Fatah and the PA. And we've seen that in the past. We've seen in the way that Palestinians have rallied behind them in national, local, and even student elections purely just as a way of expressing opposition to Fatah, not necessarily because many adhere to their ideology. But as a governing body, we do, you know, again, as these opinion polls have reflected, and as we - it's common knowledge Hamas was widely unpopular as government of Gaza, but they are popular when they do embody the spirit of resistance, which they have done occasionally over the past few decades and especially since the October the 7th, unlike the PA. You know, Mahmoud Abbas was very quick to come out and condemn the events of 7th of October and condemn Hamas. And he only then later retracted those statements when when there was significant blowback against him.

KARAM: Yeah. No, this is, I think it's it's really interesting that, where Hamas, seeing its rise in popularity is, in the West Bank, but slightly less in Gaza. I want to go to, to Shibley. And, Shibley, we, we speak today as Secretary Blinken arrives in the region on yet another trip. The U.S. administration has not called for a ceasefire yet. But they are engaging with the Palestinian Authority. What does Blinken need to do to make sure that, you know, this fractured, this volatile situation in the West Bank, that's this, very unpopular Palestinian Authority does not crumble. Think you may need to --

TELHAMI: Unmute, yes, yes. Thank you. Good to see you, Joyce and good to see you, my friend, Khalil, friend and colleague for many years. And to meet you, Tahani, virtually. Let me just say two things first, Joyce, before I talk about Blinken and what the U.S. is doing. And one is this conversation that we have, we all obviously have to think about what's happening to Palestinian society and what's likely to happen in the future. That's always important, as is the case about Israeli society and what's happening in the future. You have to think ahead. But in a way, I worry about two elements here that we have to be mindful of, that this thinking ahead, you know, might distract us from the enormous task that remains. This war is not over. A catastrophe is upon us. And we don't want to take any energy away from dealing with the current catastrophe and stopping it and providing help and not get distracted with some, you know, promises for the future might come or might not come. So, one of the things that I worry about in having these conversations

is distraction from the enormous task that remains now. Let's stop this. This is this is a catastrophe. People are getting killed, people are starving. We need to -- and certainly, the Gazans mostly, but also in Israel, who are people who have been displaced from the north and and the south. So we need to we need to bring this to an end. We don't want to, you know, distract from that. The second thing is, this conversation is a bit early analytically, but why do I say that? I think because, you know, the war hasn't ended, and and even if there's a ceasefire, as, Blinken is trying to make sure there is one and and provide a horizon, that may not be the end of this war. And, and the end of the war is going to, in a way, if, if it ends and I'm not even sure what that ending means, is going to have so many ramifications for what might happen in the West Bank and Gaza. For example, we're not yet out of the wood lot in terms of the spread of war beyond even Gaza. Now, obviously, we see what's happening in the West Bank, Khalil talked about it. It could be an explosion in the West Bank. We don't know yet, right, and hopefully there won't be, but that's obviously on the horizon. That's obviously possible. In addition, there could be an all-out war with Hezbollah. That's not out of the question at all. Anybody who thinks it's out of the question has not followed this issue very closely. Even if Hezbollah doesn't want to, or Iran doesn't want it, or even many Israelis don't want it, some do, and escalation is, you know, happens even when you don't want it. And we've seen that, we've seen that. And it could drag Iran and it could drag the U.S. in. If there's an all-out war between Hezbollah and Israel that drags Iran, the U.S. in, Gaza, even with all of the catastrophe, becomes more of a side story. And and so I think that we really have to, I think our first objective should be, let's end this war, right. And we need to put a lot of effort into it because we can't even discuss this analytically. Now, let me put, in terms of the effort of what, what the Biden administration is doing, not just this particular visit. I've been critical. I wrote a piece, actually, for Brookings back on October 27th saying that this is a dangerous policy, in part because I think that the total embrace of the Israeli right government in Gaza not only led to what we see as a humanitarian disaster, but it was bound to lead to escalation. I've said that from from the beginning, and that's still on the horizon. And I think that, right now, the, the, the Biden administration does not have any credibility in much of the Arab world. And so when we say, what are they going to sell? How are they going to sell it? Certainly at the public level, you know, we can differentiate between governments -- who absolutely are dependent on the U.S., and must deal with the U.S. and will work with the U.S., and they have their own strategic interests -- and their public opinion. And that includes even the Palestinian Authority, which obviously has no choice, it is an entirely dependent entity. We we talk about it like it was a state or a government of a state, when in fact it is operating within one state reality, dependent on Israel as well as on the, of, on the U.S. and the international community. Even though obviously it has options within those limited constraints, limited options, but it's not a major player on its own that can be transformative. So given that, what I worry about is that the

administration was operating in a way, naively, initially, particularly about the numbers that Khalil presented, which is, Hamas has become more popular, and I submit to you not only in the West Bank, probably in much of the Arab world. And, and I said that --

KARAM: You're talking about after October 7th.

TELHAMI: -- after October 7th, yes. And and that didn't shock me. I wrote about it then, I, even in the article in October, I said it would be naive to think that, you know, if you say it's Hamas, not everybody else, people are going to blame Hamas for this and not the Israelis, just like the Israelis themselves are, of course, going to blame the Palestinians. They're not going to blame their leaders first, even if they're angry with their leaders. So it hardens, you know, wars like this when you have such huge atrocities and pain, you know, hearts harden and people blame the other and there's dehumanization. Nothing is new here. I mean, this should have been expected by the administration. They, that's certainly not what they expected. Now they realize it and they're trying to again play this two-state card. Now of course, it is not impossible in theory because I happen to think, as you know, in the book that we put out recently with, with colleagues, it is already a one-state reality and a deeply unjust one-state reality. But I don't know where it's headed. It certainly isn't headed toward a one state with equality. And it's certainly not headed, in my opinion, toward two states. Has this environment that has transformed politics in some ways, has this made two states more likely or less likely? Too early to tell, obviously, because of the things that I said earlier. But in my opinion, it's probably made them harder. It made them harder because of the hardening of positions in the West Bank and Gaza. So the Secretary of State is going there, I think, with a, you know, more likely focus on de-escalation. The U.S. does not want war with Iran or Israel-Hezbollah war, for sure. Number two, they probably want a ceasefire, long term ceasefire. And number three, they want to allude to a long-term horizon. That's part of the conversation in the discourse. Those are the only things that are available to him in the short term.

KARAM: Thank you. I think we've wanted to go to Dr. Khalil, but I don't see him. We'll go back to him. Tahani, you mentioned Mahmoud Abbas, how weak he is. 90% -- Oh, there is, there is, there is Khalil. Well, I'll just go to Tahani really quickly on on Mahmoud Abbas. 90% want him to resign. But again, I mean, he's, he's a survivor. He's never he's never built his, his political legacy on being popular. This is a guy who entered, you know, politics after the Second Intifada just saying that violence does not, might not be the only answer with, with Israel. So, who do we see as alternatives to Abbas, if there are any alternatives? Or to put

this question also differently, could his weakness be an advantage to him, in being somebody who does not stake his positions or his politics on being popular?

MUSTAFA: Yeah. I mean, I think this has been the question, especially over the last 2 or 3 years now. The older he gets, the more his health continues to, to deteriorate. The question is who can replace him? And as I said earlier, he has destroyed every institutional avenue to guarantee a legitimate successor. You know, I think, at this point, Mahmoud Abbas does recognize that he is in an incredibly weak position. He has effectively centralized his power in what has now become a dormant institution. The problem is, the PA has played a waiting game here. It's assumed that it can do what it normally does in these instances, which is to sit back and just weather the storm. But this is a very different type of storm. And at this point, his entire party is unraveling before him. You know, you have, you have numerous different factions of Fatah that have been engaging in reconciliation talks with Hamas that are unanimous that there needs to be reconciliation, that they need a united front to start pursuing things like a ceasefire and a political horizon. And the only one, the primary obstacle in that way is Mahmoud Abbas. You know, that's something even regional states are in agreement on.

KARAM: Dr. Khalil --

MUSTAFA: Sorry I was going to -- Hamas have been very, actually very proactive. And there have been initiatives being floated in terms of being able to provide some kind of a united front. But again, the obstacle being official Fatah, which, unfortunately, you know, the PA and its Western allies continue to prop up and that, you know, that has, unfortunately shown that the constraints on any future of Palestinian politics will be driven by what the international community allows to be possible.

KARAM: Dr. Khalil, do you agree with this assessment? The PA being very weak, but also not allowing any alternative. Also, I want to ask you on how will the the the question of reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas emerge from this war? Do you see it more likely? We've been waiting for it now for 16, 17 years, it hasn't happened. Or is it, do you see the status quo holding up?

SHIKAKI: The lack of initiative on the part of the Palestinian Authority is because the leadership lacks legitimacy and therefore it is unable to take any bold measures. And survival seems to be the most important and driving force. It wants to survive. And it thinks that by doing nothing, this increases the prospect of its

survival. One of the things that it could do, it could have done before October the 7th and can do now is to, indeed reach out to Hamas to reconcile and reunify the West Bank and Gaza, create unified leadership that is much more, would be much more effective in dealing with ongoing war. And the discussion about the day after and certainly, about engagement of, of any kind with regard to diplomacy with the U.S., and actually with the state of Israel. Whether it is on the two-state solution or any other solution, the lack of initiative on the part of the Palestinian Authority, to do any of this is simply because the Palestinian Authority lacks this legitimacy and is unwilling to go to elections to restore its legitimacy. Going to elections means Abbas will lose. The Palestinian Authority today is Abbas. That is to say, it's a one man show. His own survival, therefore, is dictating that he does nothing and wait for others to take the initiative and where that can guarantee his own survival. What makes him willing to do this is the fact that despite the huge amount of discontent that we see today and the fact that he has no credibility with the Palestinian public is that the Palestinian public has not become militant against Abbas. There is no effort or demands among the Palestinian public today to destabilize the West Bank, to destabilize the Palestinian Authority. The fear of civil war, what happened in the Arab countries after the Arab Spring is constraining the options in front of the Palestinian public. And, it, we're not likely, therefore, to see Abbas (inaudible) and will remain, even though on the most simple issue of humanitarian management of humanitarian services. The Palestinian Authority does have sufficient management (Inaudible) for the Palestinian Authority to be able to raise the necessary funds and manage the entire process of humanitarian services to Gazans. By being there either in Gaza, in the borders of Gaza to help deliver services. This would certainly be one way in which the Palestinian Authority can restore some of its credibility and gain some public trust. Yet it is not doing that, it seems. For the Palestinian public the perception is that the Palestinian Authority is waiting to see who comes out on top by the end of this war. The effort to reconcile, therefore, isn't likely to happen while the war is ongoing. Perhaps after the war, depending on on on how things evolve, Abbas will be able to make a decision on what direction he needs to go. (Inaudible) whatever he does at that moment, given the fact that he lacks any credibility or legitimacy, will be rejected by the overwhelming majority of the Palestinian public. The only way to create an environment in which the Palestinians both (inaudible) restore governance. Whether it is in Gaza or the West Bank will depend on the ability of Palestinians today to act together and prepare for the news to restore legitimacy and the credibility to the Palestinian Authority. That means Abbas cannot be part of that arrangement. There's absolutely no chance whatsoever that he can win elections. Must do this if the Palestinian Authority is to survive and the Palestinians to be able to be in a position to determine their own future after the war.

KARAM: Thank you. So it's a waiting-out game for Mahmoud Abbas. The, I will follow up with you that the question would be, how would the outcome of the war determine also if Abbas exits the scene, who comes next? I imagine a, if Hamas survives this war and it looks very much like you, and Tahani and Shibley are making the point that Hamas' popularity is on the rise. And it's still part and parcel of the political society. Then who are we looking at? But I want to go to Shibley again on National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, U.S. national security adviser, told Alhurra on Friday that he does not foresee Hamas being any part of any final settlement between the Israelis and the Palestinians. How realistic is that? And, as far as Hamas is concerned, where do you see the group hedging its bets in the aftermath of the war?

TELHAMI: Well, to assess that, Joyce, let's think that the Biden administration actually succeeds in, with Qatar and Egypt, reaching a ceasefire agreement now that would last six weeks to two months, which is what has been talked about. Let's assume that's the case. Presumably, if that should happen, the fighting will end where we are now. And presumably -- that's certainly what the Biden administration is hoping -- it will not renew the end of March or the beginning of, of April, because if it were going to renew, imagine what that's going to do to the presidential campaign of the, this war has helped -- hurt the president a lot, particularly among Democrats. And if you're you're having this, delivery of, of of services and humanitarian and, you know, situation, alleviated during those few weeks and then you restart the war that, that's just hard to imagine. So therefore, the war would end where it is now, and the war, where it ends right now, obviously, Hamas is still intact, Hamas is still in control. Hamas, yes, it, I'm sure it's substantially weakened. You know, you don't -- and obviously the Palestinians are devastated and everybody's going to need help because there's no way Hamas can govern Gaza, given what there is and given the international humanitarian conditions. There's a lot, the international community is going to have to weigh in. There's nothing that authority can do to help Gazans. All of this is going to come from the international community to, to, on the scale that is required is going to take not years, maybe decades and enormous amounts. So there has to be obviously a role for the international community. But how are you going to then dissuade the remaining Hamas control in Gaza? How are you going to dissuade them from having a role? So it's really hard to see. And with regard to the Palestinians in general and what kind of card somebody like Mahmoud Abbas can play, obviously, it's always been the case that it would be impossible for him to go into Gaza, even if you could, even if he has real authority, on the back of Israeli tanks. I mean, that has not, you know, and look at the numbers. So, it would have to be a kind of a revised authority, whether it's done in conversations with Hamas or with other groups or with the national, or whether there's a new election. I just can't imagine that

anybody can then dictate, whether Hamas going to have a role or not. Just it is it's part of the reality that now exists. And, I just can't see, how that's going to change in any foreseeable future.

KARAM: Tahani, these are very important points by, by Shibley. I want to narrow down a little bit. First on the question, would Hamas, consider, you know, well, we don't know if elections will happen or not, but let's say, would Hamas consider joining the PLO? What would that look like? And on the question of governance in Gaza, part of why Hamas rose to the stage in 2007 was also in part bad governance in, in Gaza. Where do you see that going? You know, what we're what we're looking at, what we're looking at is just pure devastation. In the North, it doesn't look like the Israeli military is, is leaving anytime soon. So where do you see the question of governance in Gaza going? And would Hamas join the, the PLO?

MUSTAFA: So I'm going to go with the first question, regarding Hamas's participation in the PLO. Yes. I mean, that has been Hamas's stated goal for quite some time now, which is to relinquish its governing authority over Gaza, which it knows has made it weaker and as a, as a movement, and has also led to its delegitimization amongst Palestinians, given its abysmal track record as a governing body. So, you know, Hamas have been very open, especially since 7th of October with regards to reconciliation talks, been trying to engage with, regarding its position of wanting a seat within the PLO or wanting a fair share of its representation within the PLO and relinquishing governance in Gaza. That was something that actually. the 2021 reconciliation deal predicated on the elections was all about, right. Because I remember a lot of the time, observers were wondering why Hamas would accept such a, what at that time was, was, was such a poor deal for them, where they were forced to run their election on the basis of not securing a majority, where they accepted Mahmoud Abbas changing the electoral system to guarantee that they wouldn't secure a victory, where they were refusing to put forward their own candidates' ministerial positions. And all of that was very clear, that they, their interest was representation within the PLO rather than the PA. And that that position has not changed today. The question is, I think as, as, Shibley was saying, is that the U.S., and the rest of the international community are claiming that dealing with Hamas is an absolute nonstarter. So the question for the Palestinians is, how do you create, a national leadership that incorporates what what has effectively become a national, sorry, an international pariah? You know, I'm not, I think that is one of the tragic things to come out of October the 7th for Hamas. You know, for them, it wasn't just about breaking the stalemate between Palestinians and Israelis and the way the international community dealt with the Palestinians, but more importantly, the stalemate that was internal to Palestinian politics. And it's basically taking Hamas from international isolation to being an international pariah. And also, as has been stated, by

other members of this discussion, an extension of PA control into Gaza has been mooted. You know, whether the whether PA officials or any other group, Palestinian Arabs would accept, effectively riding, in on the coattails of the Israeli army to govern what is now rubble and destruction has left a valid question, right? First of all, how much of Gaza's population is there going to be to govern and whether what is left of Gaza can be ruled by any arrangement imposed on it by Israel and the international community, which is, you know, another matter entirely to assume that you can impose an authority. And again, when the international community speak of this authority, they speak about it in technocratic, not democratic terms. To think that you can impose an authority that's devoid of any legitimacy or political substance is not only morally questionable, but also operationally, at this point, faulty. What has led us to the predicament is precisely the fact that Palestinians do not have a legitimate leadership. They feel they do not have advocate to push for their rights, on an international stage. And it's precisely why push them into the corner and is pushing younger generations to revert to things like armed resistance and violence, including Hamas.

TELHAMI: Joyce, if I may, I just I, I want to just add one point, which we are of course, you know, this is about Palestinian politics, but you can't separate it, obviously from international politics or especially Israeli politics, right. So, what happens in Gaza the day after? What are the options going to depend on what Israel wants to do or is going to do? And we do know that that's a hugely critical question, because obviously there are many members of this Israeli cabinet who would love to see the Palestinians removed from Gaza and have been working on that. Now, whether or not that becomes the agenda is not, obviously, the U.S. has said, absolute red line. This is not acceptable. And certainly Egypt and Jordan and others have said the same. But the Israeli objectives obviously are going to matter here. They still have thousands of troops in Gaza. It's going to remain the case even if there is a ceasefire. So it isn't, you know, that's why I say this is an early conversation. That is just thinking out loud about options. But it's an evolving one and it's not over yet.

KARAM: No, for sure. I want to go to, to Khalil. You mentioned --

MUSTAFA: Sorry Joyce, I just wanted to interject something just quickly. Sorry. That was just a point made earlier about the fact that Palestinians are not looking to overthrow the PA for fear of a civil war. And I think maybe part of that sentiment is true. But there is a larger factor which goes back to the international constraints, which is that the majority of Palestinians don't see any point of overthrowing the PA. It's not that

they can't or wouldn't, but the question is, what do you do with it once you have it? And again, it would be subject to the same constraints that the current institution is.

KARAM: And that was actually my, my follow up question to Khalil. What, I mean, you mentioned the, the big hole that the PA is in. This is a moment where the international community, the regional countries, including Saudi Arabia, are seeing an opportunity to rehabilitate the Palestinian Authority. What kind of reforms would be urgent to do that? And, where do you see, particularly countries like Saudi Arabia, and, Turkey, Qatar, others in the region, coming in to do that?

SHIKAKI: The most important measure that can be taken to reform the Palestinian Authority is to ask the Palestinian Authority to observe its own constitutional rules. The Palestinian Authority has been violating these rules every single day. The Palestinian president has essentially destroyed the ability of the Palestinians to have any strong, accountable political institutions. We need to restore that capacity to the Palestinian institutions. This essentially means that we need to have a strong prime minister. Our system on paper is mostly a parliamentary system, not a presidential system. The current Palestinian president is making it on the factual basis a presidential system. A strong prime minister who is independent of the president, as required by our Constitution, would be someone who would be able -- if that person is selected. Right now, we have elections immediately. We do need to have an interim government -- but under a strong prime minister, that would be the choice of some sort of, a dialogue, perhaps even a consensus, if one can be reached, by all factions and civil society. Such a government can perhaps be asked to begin to restore the legitimacy by strengthening the institutions of the Palestinian Authority, making them more accountable, prepared to hold elections. In addition, of course, to restoring some level of stability, and provide, manage the provision of humanitarian services in the Gaza Strip. This government has to be one that is not political, because in the West Bank, the overwhelming majority rejects the, the ruling party in the West Bank. In Gaza, they reject Hamas more than they reject the ruling party. And you if you have a political government right now, then it will not be able to win the support or the trust of the public. And so you need a government that is not political on an interim basis with a specific mission, but one that is independent by observing the Palestinian Basic Law. And once elections are held, so there is an expiration date for this interim government, and that is, the, formation of the next government after the elections. This would be the only sustainable manner by which we can reform the Palestinian Authority. Any other measure is likely to fail. It could be just a stopgap for a short period of time. It certainly isn't going to provide for a strong, effective public institutions or to create a leadership that would be able to manage the postwar environment or engage

in any discussion about future Israeli-Palestinian relations, including the possibility of negotiating a two-state solution.

KARAM: But for that to happen, I'm just I want to see where the cart and the horse are. You're saying we need elections to get to a stronger prime minister? Or can the US, as it did, you know, during the first, second Bush term, push for a stronger premier, under Arafat at the time? Or do you not need elections, and you can go immediately to reforms within the PA?

SHIKAKI: You need an interim government. For the interim government, that government must not be political, but it must have a strong prime minister. A strong prime minister that we need now is one who can win the support of not just the public, but also the various factions, including Hamas. And this government should cease to exist once we hold the elections. The elections by themselves would produce a strong prime minister. Because as I said earlier, our, the nature of the system is mostly parliamentary. The president has specific powers. He does not have as much jurisdiction as Abbas is currently enjoying. Abbas is enjoying it only because he's violating the Basic Laws. So by observing the Basic Law, we create strong political --

KARAM: I think you accidentally muted yourself.

SHIKAKI: -- that is what is needed to happen in the long term after the elections. But in the short term, we do need to have an arranged environment in which we ask the president to restrict his jurisdiction and responsibility to what is given to him by the Constitution, by the Basic Law, and to allow a prime minister to be independent of him, as it would have been had there been a parliament. It would not be a government that reports to the president. It would be a government that reports only to the parliament. Both the president and the prime minister report to the parliament. The prime minister in our political system does not report to the president. The current arrangement is all in violation of the Basic Law. So all we, I believe, the only thing that will work is for us to simply observe our basic Law. In an interim basis today, by having a strong prime minister with the consensus of the various factions and the support of the public, and, for a more sustained environment, we do need to have elections. There is absolutely no other way in which we can have a sustained outcome that has legitimacy and credibility.

KARAM: Shibley, on the regional players, and there is a lot of talk in this town on, you know, potential of Saudi-Israel normalization if it, to state, if we see a commitment, to a two-state solution. But as far as

Palestinian politics, we've seen more Saudi efforts sending the ambassador, an ambassador to, to Ramallah, meeting with PA officials prior to October 7th. Where do you see this all, you know, fitting together? Where do you put the pieces together on the regional arena?

TELHAMI: Put aside why Hamas attacked and what it did. The horrific attack on October 7th. There was a lot of despair in, in the Palestinian areas, both in Gaza and, the West Bank. I was there, just a few days before October 7th, I was in Israel and the West Bank during that time. And the despair was coming in part because, of giving up, in a way, on the Biden administration. Because when the Biden administration came after the Trump administration was, was, you know, was seen as very anti-Palestinian, there was so much hope for initiating diplomacy, for using leverage on human rights, for restraining the settlements. And obviously none of that happened. So all of the efforts that the Biden administration was putting were, in a way taking away what seemed to be like the peaceful option toward two states. Sort of, supporting U.N. resolution against settlement. Obviously the, instead, the Biden administration chose to, to veto that. And instead of, using Israeli-Arab negotiations to achieve two states or ending of the occupation, it was seen to be something that was at the expense of the Palestinians. Whether or not they could have done more, it's hard to know, but certainly that's the way it was seen. So people were very angry in a way, because that, the Abraham Accords was seen to have normalize relations with the Arab world. Historically, the Arab world was supposed to be the leverage that the Palestinians need to get compromises from Israel to end the occupation. That was the whole idea of the Arab plan, spearheaded by, by Saudi Arabia a couple of decades ago, and that was the basis of using Arab leverage. Of course, that was not happening. And with the Saudis, the biggest reward happening, it was talked about as if it would be giving the Palestinians very little. And, then having this biggest new prize, Saudi Arabia and the relationship with Israel to a very right wing government, the most right wing government in the history of Israel, as Biden himself put, who, which obviously was not, was committed to retaining the West Bank and not committed to a two-state solution. Right. So, so you can imagine this kind of context that that was prevailing. And now the talk of, the talk of this reviving that, obviously cannot be built on promises. There is no faith or trust, certainly at the public level, of what Biden would promise. They've talked of two states before, were seen to be smoke screen before October 7th. Now, if you want to get an agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia for the promise of something that would come down the road on the Palestinians, that was seem, seemed to be exactly the opposite what people want. So the question for the administration would be, can they do something today concrete, in favor of Palestinian state? Not by promising, but actions that could take today that could be irreversible. That would be tied to agreements between Israel, Saudi Arabia. That's the big question. I

happen to think that even if there were such steps, it's unlikely that, what we have seen from President Biden in the past few weeks and months, he would be able or willing to, to use them. And so I think right now, this talk is, is just talk and I think it'll, it'll probably be the, the game because that's what Biden administration is talking about right now. The Saudis, it's very hard to know the extent to which the Saudi government is impacted by public opinion. Remember, we're talking about, you know, authoritarian rulers who are influenced up to a point by the publics but can obviously go against the publics, and that's not unusual in the history of the Middle East. And they can still do it based on their strategic calculations. They know there's a lot of anger with Israel. There's a lot of anger with the U.S., and they know that this is for the Saudis is actually a moment for them where they can even show clout at the Arab and Muslim level if they want to. And they have said, that they don't want to do it without advancing a Palestinian state. But there were rumors that they may want, may, may, proceed even with just promises rather than actions in the short term, that would be irreversible. I think that's where, where the conversation is going right now.

KARAM: Thank you. Tahani, on what Dr. Khalil brought up in, in terms of this is largely a question of governance within the PA, less so, of of perhaps a leader, name of a leader that would succeed Abbas. I know some names have been floating. One of them is, of course, Marwan Barghouti, if he were to be released. Do you agree that this is this is, this is more on the structure of of of the PA and how how, empowered would be the next prime minister? If you can speak a little on Marwan Barghouti, why is Hamas - what do you think is the thinking behind Hamas calling for his release?

MUSTAFA: I mean, Marwan Barghouti is one of the few, if only, unifying candidates that all the factions can agree on. Hence why, you know, it's not just Hamas, but also the other factions, it's the FLP, Fatah, Islamic Jihad, even the Palestine National Initiative are willing to rally behind him. And they, you know, each each faction has their own reasons, but he is really the only unifying candidate that Palestinians have. I think the problem when it comes to renewal isn't for the lack of innovation or ideas. There are plenty of ideas floating around, whether it's renewal for the PA or renewal for the PLO. The problem is that there is no single institution or individual or faction that can actually help drive and implement those ideas ultimately, and that's, that's when we say that Palestinians are experiencing a political vacuum. They're the most divided they've ever been. That's not an understatement to say. You know, Dr. Khalil was talking very much about renewal predicated on elections, but that's very unlikely given the fact that the international community and Israel are absolutely adamant on preventing any kind of renewal of the PA or Palestinian institutions through elections, precisely because they are so worried or fearful that Palestinians will choose leaders they don't

like. You know, we saw the lack of support in 2021. We've seen the lack of conditionality of the, ever since 2006, after the preemptive coup in 2007. There has been a complete reluctance to push for elections, which is why today, when the U.S. and the Western international community at least, or even, I'd say even regional states, when they talk about a revitalized and reformed PA, they do so not in democratic terms, but technocratic terms. So, I think, you know, that that is where ultimately Palestinians are now facing. When we talk about a succession crisis, that's not to say that elections are not on the table. It's just that that seems to be the least-favored avenue by those in power who are in the running for succession. Which is why I think given today, you know, you can sketch out a whole range of broad possibilities, in terms of ways, to ways to renew the PA and the PLO. But the most, I think, realistic. I mean, even Marwan Barghouti is not a realistic option at this point in time, given the fact that the entire plan around him is predicated on Israel actually releasing him, which seems very unlikely. But the most likely outcome seems to be what many were actually talking about prior to the 7th of October, which was also, you know, a very possible reality for the last year, which is that you could very well see the collapse of the PA, you know, or you could see it turn into a disaggregate collection of institutions which, you know, can, in their own way, provide for Palestinian lives, supported through aid but controlled through various factions or individuals. And so what you would effectively be left with would be something like a rotating Palestinian presidency. I mean, I remember at the time, prior to the 7th October, those in the running for succession were thinking about trying to turn the PA into something of the Libyan model, again, where you would have a rotating presidency precisely because there was no single institution that was legitimate enough to create any kind of appointment process for any interim government or individual. And so the idea was to share power ultimately between, between those that were in the running for succession because they felt like not a single one of them could really outstrip the other in terms of influence and power.

KARAM: Thank you. Dr. Khalil, I want to go to you for quick last two questions. You mentioned settlers violence at the outset. How big of an issue is that in, in Ramallah? How much it's hurting Palestinian Authority and rallying the public? And then quickly, on the second one, do you see a scenario where Hamas would amend its, its charter, as the PLO did in the past and become, more of a, you know, political player in the, in the PLO, eventually in the in the PA.

SHIKAKI: Settler violence is extremely damaging to the Palestinian Authority not because of what the settlers do, but because of what the Palestinian Authority does not do. The Palestinian Authority presents itself by failing to defend those communities that are vulnerable to settler attacks, as if its security sector is

designed to defend and protect Israelis, but not Palestinians. This is extremely damaging to the credibility and legitimacy of the Palestinian Authority, and its popularity goes down with every single settler attack. That is certainly a major failure on the part of the Palestinian Authority. No one else is responsible for that but the Palestinian Authority. On the question of Hamas, I do think that Hamas, despite the fact that it is an ideological movement and a religious one, and so on, that Hamas, like other Islamists, is open to, to moderate its views. It is not dogmatic. It is, this is not we're not talking about some of the extreme Islamist groups, like al-Qaida or ISIS. Hamas comes from the more moderate branch of Islamism. That would be highly, in my view, open through dialogue to the possibility of moving along the lines of what the PLO have done. Introducing Hamas into the PLO would be one way in which Hamas can, on de facto basis, begin to embrace those positions of the PLO. Hamas, in my view, would be willing to enter the PLO without it changing its own views, but also without it challenging the views and the positions of the PLO. This would be the kind of compromises that Hamas is probably ready to endorse or embrace right now, that it, it will accept what the PLO had done, but it will not itself as a political party endorse it or support it. That would certainly be one way in which Hamas can begin a process of integration, not only in the institutions, but also an integration by endorsing the overall positions that the PLO endorses today.

KARAM: Thank you. Trust me, I can go for another hour or two, but we have to conclude. This has been very insightful. Great panel to have, with really knowledgeable Palestinian academics and scholars on, on, what we are seeing, play out, in, in Gaza and in the West Bank. Thank you for hosting us, Brookings. Thanks for joining us on this Monday morning. And have a great day ahead.

SHIKAKI: Thank you.