



2022-03(S)

The Palestinian Leadership Clash and Prospects for the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Jang Ji-Hyang, Senior Fellow

Yoo Ah Rum, Research Associate
The Asan Institute for Policy Studies
2022.04.25

On a tour of the Middle East, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken reaffirmed his support for the Abraham Accords in his first visit to Israel on March 27. In 2020, Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain signed the Abraham Accords to establish diplomatic ties, and Sudan and Morocco also normalized relations with Israel. The Abraham Accords announced a new détente between Arab countries and Israel but did not address the Palestinian issue. The long-standing taboo in the Arab world of “no diplomatic ties with Israel without the establishment of an independent Palestinian state” has been broken.

Secretary Blinken visited the West Bank and met with Palestinian National Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas to emphasize the improvement of the living standards of the people rather than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As usual, Abbas condemned Israel’s “occupation.” The next day, at a kibbutz in the Israeli Negev desert, the foreign ministers of Israel and four Arab countries met to discuss the Middle East security issue with Secretary Blinken in attendance. A spokesman for Hamas, another axis of the Palestinian leadership, strongly condemned the meeting as a “perpetuation of Israeli aggression.” As such, the Palestinian leadership has failed to keep pace with the rapid changes in regional dynamics.

Authoritarianism in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and the Conflict between Fatah and Hamas

A resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict seemed to be in the making with the 1993 Oslo Accords, which “exchanged land for peace” and the establishment of the PA in 1994, however, it did not result in the establishment of the State of Palestine. Over the past 25 years, Israel has expanded illegal settlements in the West Bank and has continued to blockade the Gaza Strip, and suppressed protests. However, the Palestinian leadership did not cooperate to counter Israel but split into Fatah, which leads the PA, and Hamas, an Islamic fundamentalist militant organization. They have focused on consolidating their power base in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, respectively.

After Hamas won the 2006 general election, Fatah refused to acknowledge the results, and the fight between the two escalated into bloodshed. In 2007, the two organizations managed to form a unified government through Saudi Arabia's arbitration, but a financial crisis arose when the U.S. and the European Union (EU), which designated Hamas as a terrorist organization, stopped providing aid. Soon after, Fatah's head, Mahmoud Abbas, appointed a new prime minister arbitrarily, and Hamas, in protest, seized the Gaza Strip by force. The elections were postponed indefinitely as the bipartisan leadership of the Palestinian leadership entered into a political struggle, and the parliament has remained vacant since 2010.

The 15-year long conflict between Fatah and Hamas not only involved confrontation between their respective military, police, and security forces but also the suppression of civilians in each area. The intelligence service in the West Bank took the lead in suppressing the protests. In 2021, a human rights activist criticizing Fatah's corruption was killed after being arrested by police. Hamas has shut down protests in the Gaza Strip. According to Amnesty International, Hamas has carried out numerous executions for treason since the mid-2010s without due process. The political strife, corruption, and incompetence of Fatah and Hamas paralyzed the basic functions of government for the people of Palestine, and there was no democracy anywhere.

Political Mistrust among Palestinians under the Authoritarian Rule of Fatah and Hamas

Since 2003, the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research in Ramallah, Palestine, has conducted polls of residents in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip on a quarterly basis. Polls conducted in December 2021 show that Palestinians are concerned about corruption (26%), poverty and unemployment (22%), the Gaza blockade (20%), Israeli occupation (16%), the division of leadership in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (12%). As authoritarian rule in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip intensifies, the main issue for Palestinians is not the confrontation with Israel, but internal problems caused by the corruption and incompetence of the Palestinian leadership. The confrontation with Israel is declining as a priority. Responses to "Occupation of Israel" dropped 14% from three years ago, while those to "Division of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip" rose by 8%.

On the other hand, the percentage of respondents who answered 'low' to the question of "the probability of building an independent Palestinian state in the next five years" was an average of 72% from 2018 to 2021, overwhelmingly higher than the average of 3% who answered 'high.' In particular, the percentage of respondents who answered 'low' has held steady at 70% from 2018 to 2021, indicating that Palestinians' skepticism about the construction of an independent state is widespread. Furthermore, the percentage of those who answered that "PA is only a burden to the residents" was 53% on average during the same period, indicating that the majority of Palestinians have distrust not only in President Abbas but also in the PA itself.

Leaving the Palestinian issue aside, more than half (53%) of Palestinians believed their leadership was responsible for the Abraham Accords, in which four Arab countries established diplomatic ties with Israel in 2020. The Abraham Accords are a remarkable event that broke the long-standing taboo in the Arab world that there would be no diplomatic ties with Israel without the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. The Palestinian people, who have lost hope due to political distrust and a sense of deprivation, see their leadership as the obstacle to building an independent state.

Prospects for Fatah-Hamas Infighting and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

When the PA was established in 1994, the Palestinian people expected the establishment of a free and secure Palestinian independent state. However, those expectations have gradually been lowered by Israel's aggressive construction of illegal settlements, blockade of the Gaza Strip, armed clashes between Israel and Palestine, authoritarianism in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and conflicts between Fatah and Hamas. In recent years, the main issues of concern for Palestinians are poverty and unemployment, not the Israeli occupation. The obstacle to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state is in fact the infighting amongst Palestinian political elites.

Like the weary Palestinian people, fellow Arab countries no longer blame only Israel. While the divided Palestinian leadership is engrossed in political conflict, in 2020, Arab countries such as the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco have normalized relations with Israel in the name of the Abraham Accords. The agenda for establishing an independent Palestinian state is losing momentum, even to the U.S. Democratic government, which supported the Oslo Accords and was active in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This is the main reason for the authoritarianism of Fatah and Hamas. Meanwhile, in June 2021, for the first time in Israeli history, an Arab political party joined the coalition government, and the rights and interests of Arab Israeli citizens and Palestinian residents are expected to improve.

As Palestinians, neighboring Arab countries, and the U.S. Democratic government grow tired of the issue of creating an independent Palestinian state, Hamas will bolster its attack on Israel according to a political calculation to increase its presence. If there is even slight friction between the Israeli military and the Palestinian population, Hamas will use this as an excuse to launch a rocket at Israel and induce Israel's right to self-defense and a massive airstrike on the Gaza Strip. Eventually, if there are a lot of civilian casualties in the Gaza Strip, the international community will condemn Israel, and Hamas will declare victory. Hamas is well aware from its yearly experience that its pre-emptive strike will result in a formidable Israeli counterattack and the loss of Palestinian civilian lives, but Hamas has nonetheless pursued such attacks for their political value. Hamas, designated as a terrorist organization by the U.S. and the EU, is refusing to negotiate peace with Israel and aims to establish an Islamic State in Palestine.

Fatah, which rules the West Bank, will not hold elections for the time being, given its low approval ratings. According to a poll, 80% said that Fatah was corrupt, and 65% said they were in favor of

Abbas's resignation. Hamas will denounce Fatah's undemocratic behavior, which has consistently delayed elections and will take an offensive stance against Israel to increase its legitimacy. While Hamas pursues a hardline and anti-Israel policy, Fatah will focus on its coercive rule within the West Bank and will not be able to demonstrate the will and capacity to resolve the Israeli-Hamas armed conflict and internal conflict in the Palestinian leadership. Eventually, the conflict between the Palestinian leadership will intensify and the level of provocations by Hamas will increase. The likelihood of improved governance in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip will also be very low for the time being.

This article is an English Summary of Asan Issue Brief (2022-11).

(‘팔레스타인 지도부의 정쟁과 이스라엘-팔레스타인 갈등의 전망’, <https://www.asaninst.org/?p=82819>)



Jang Ji-Hyang

Center for Regional Studies

Dr. JANG Ji-Hyang is a senior fellow and director of the Center for Middle East and North Africa at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. Dr. Jang served as a policy advisor on Middle East issues to South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2012-2018). Previously, Dr. Jang taught comparative and Middle East politics at Seoul National University, Yonsei University, Ewha Woman's University, and the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies. Her research interests include political economy of the Middle East and North Africa, political Islam, comparative democratization, terrorism, and state-building. Dr. Jang is the author of numerous books and articles, including *The Arab Spring: Will It Lead to Democratic Transitions?* (with Clement M. Henry (eds.), Palgrave Macmillan 2013), "Disaggregated ISIS and the New Normal of Terrorism" (Asan Issue Brief 2016), "Islamic Fundamentalism" (International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences 2008), and a Korean translation of Fawaz Gerges' *Journey of the Jihadist: Inside Muslim Militancy* (Asan Institute 2011). Dr. Jang received a B.A. in Turkish studies and M.A. in political science from the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies and her Ph.D. in political science from the University of Texas at Austin.