On the battle of Karameh and Hamas

Shaul Arieli and Arnon Regular - Haaretz, June 27, 2021

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Led by Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's policies toward Hamas and the PLO, as reflected in Operation Guardian of the Walls, could give Hamas the upper hand in representing the Palestinian people - just as the Karameh operation in Jordan in March 1968 gave the PLO the upper hand in representing the Palestinians. Arafat succeeded in leveraging Israel's failure in the Karameh operation to undermine King Hussein of Jordan in his position as the representative of the Palestinians in the West Bank. Similarly, Hamas is taking advantage of the door that Israel has opened for it in Jerusalem to increase its influence in the West Bank and with some Arabs in Israel, and to push Fatah from its heading of the PLO, the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.

At the end of the War of Independence, on April 24, 1950, the Jordanian parliament, which also included Palestinian representatives, approved the unification of the West Bank with the Kingdom of Jordan. Only with the establishment of the PLO, in 1964, led by Ahmad Shuqiri, did the struggle between the Palestinians and the Hashemite Kingdom resume on the issue of representing the Palestinian people.

Immediately after the Six Day War, Palestinian organizations concentrated their armed struggle against Israel east of the river. The Karameh operation was an extensive IDF raid on the Fatah headquarters in Karameh in the southern Jordan Valley. The IDF suffered many casualties, and in a hasty retreat left tanks and armor in Jordan. Although the Arab Legion conducted most of the fighting, Arafat turned the IDF's failure into a glorious Palestinian victory, leading to Fatah's 1969 takeover of the PLO.

The American diplomat and journalist Clovis Maxud wrote in 1997 that following the Karameh operation, "the PLO had become for the Arabs the embodiment of hope that has once again returned ... the Arab masses ... entrusted the PLO with policy-making, leadership formation and the formulation of strategies for the renewed struggle".

A clear example of this was given at the Arab summit held in Rabat, Morocco, in October 1974, which recognized the PLO as the sole and legal representative of the Palestinian people. In the same month, the PLO was invited to participate in UN deliberations, in November 1974 Arafat addressed the UN, and the PLO was granted observer status at the UN and its institutions.

The first intifada, which broke out in December 1987, made it clear to Jordan that the PLO had taken its place. This, and the fact that Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir impeded the London Agreement, drafted by Shimon Peres and Hussein that year to begin a political process between the two countries – were among the main reasons for Jordan's decision, in July 1988, to sever all legislative, administrative and legal ties with the West Bank. In doing so, the PLO completed the revolution.

Hamas was founded by members of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Gaza Strip led by Sheikh Ahmad Yassin with the outbreak of the first intifada, after gaining power in the 1980s, with the encouragement of Israel, which saw it as an alternative to the PLO.

Until 2006, Hamas waged a war of attrition on Israel and the Oslo Accords. Hamas' decision, following Israel's disengagement from Gaza in 2005, to take part in the political struggle for the leadership of the Palestinian people by participating in the Palestinian parliamentary elections in 2006, was a very important move. Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh explained it this way: "Hamas is at a point where it is moving from a situation of satisfying the needs of the organization and its supporters, to a situation of satisfying the needs of all residents. Hamas is not interested in local takeover; it is interested in creating broad historical change ... and is aiming its efforts to enter the Palestinian Authority government and to creating a new PLO". That is, Hamas sought to rob the PLO of its status as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.

Hamas, which took over the Gaza Strip militarily in 2007 and split from the Palestinian Authority, failed to bring about change and succeed the PLO - neither among the Palestinians nor in the international community, which sees it as a terrorist organization. Hence it chose to change strategy and take over the PLO from within.

Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar proposed to Mahmoud Abbas in 2017 to run the Strip, as his predecessor, Haniyeh, had suggested in 2014, before Operation Protective Edge. This move, which was seen as a step backwards, was considered by Sinwar to be an effective one - it would free Hamas from responsibility for the residents of the Gaza Strip and allow it to break through its narrow borders to the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Israel and the region.

On the issue of the military arm, too, Sinwar has come a long way and said in 2017: "We as a people are still in the national liberation stage, and cannot give up our weapons. Our weapons should be under an overall national umbrella, in which all Palestinians will participate, and that umbrella is the PLO". Sinwar recognized what most Israeli government ministers do not recognize: The PLO, despite its weakness, is the best platform for Hamas to break through Gaza's borders into the West Bank.

On the other hand, in the last decade Israel has cooperated with Hamas, as it did in the 1980s. Netanyahu's policy seeks to preserve the rule of Hamas and to continue the division of the Palestinian Authority. It is enough to mention his remarks in a closed forum of Likud members on March 11, 2019: "The transfer of money (to Hamas) is part of the strategy to separate the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. Anyone who opposes the establishment of a Palestinian state should support the transfer of funds from Qatar to Hamas. This is how we will thwart the establishment of a Palestinian state". Since 2012, Netanyahu has authorized Qatar to transfer a total of about $ 1 billion to Gaza, and at least half of that amount has gone to Hamas.

Israel has opened the door to Hamas on the way to a possible change in the representation of the Palestinians, in some misguided steps it took in Jerusalem during the month of Ramadan, such as placing the checkpoints at the Nablus Gate, canceling the use of speakers on the Temple Mount and more. It also allowed Abbas to cancel the elections due to the Israeli ban on placing ballots in East Jerusalem. Netanyahu has given Hamas the convenient platform that is most identified with it - the religious dimension. Hamas snatched it with both hands to gain prestige as a defender of Jerusalem and al-Aqsa. At the same time, it gives the Palestinians - in Israel, the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza - a signal for a violent outbreak, even if its roots are not only in the religious dimension, but in discrimination, social disregard, housing and employment distress, identity crisis, settler abuse and international community disregard, headed by the Biden administration.

The confrontation revealed that Abbas is the most isolated man in the Middle East: isolated in the pan-Arab context, because he did not talk to Arab leaders to coordinate positions around the current crisis; and isolated in his party, Fatah, who split because of him into three camps (his supporters, the al-Kidwa-Barghouti list, and supporters of Muhammad Dahlan), two of whom began working together to replace him in the run-up to the election, and even more so after their cancelation.

In the PLO he is in a dismal state. He's allies are six quirky organizations, without a public presence. Four other PLO organizations that have a presence on the Palestinian street have joined he's opponents or adopted Hamas's positions. In the past year, Abbas has also lost two of the PLO symbols in the world: Secretary-General Saib Erekat, who passed away, and Hanan Asrawi, who resigned demonstratively due to his dictatorial conduct. Although Abbas enjoyed institutional legitimacy as chairman of the PLO, he lost the elections-based legitimacy because he was elected once, in 2005. Legitimacy stemming from the struggle in Israel (as Muhammad Daf, Marwan Barghouti and others have) he never had.

The agreement between Fatah and Hamas last September to establish a new Palestinian National Council (PNC), which will replace the one Fatah has controlled since 1968, is the biggest threat to Abbas and Fatah. The new PNC has 350 members; 132 of them MPs who were supposed to be elected in the canceled elections. Hamas, even before the violent events, was expected to be the largest party in the new parliament, and according to opinion polls, to win 50-60 seats, which is about 15% of the new PNC. The rest of the PNC members are to be elected in a way that has not yet been determined from among the communities outside the territories, which usually support Abbas' opponents and independent candidates. Fatah was expected to become a small minority. But the threat to Abbas and Fatah is not limited to Hamas. The hottest Palestinian story these days is the "unaffiliated" (in Arabic: al-Qawam al-Mustaqla) - enthusiastic young militants who have been the hard core of the protesters in East Jerusalem, Israel and the West Bank in the past month. These are social media activists with hundreds of thousands of followers. They are expected to be the critical factor in any future parliament or PNC, within independent parties, and together with the opposition forces within Fatah and Hamas they are expected to soon lead, within a short period, to the elimination of the public presence of the disappearing Abbas supporting camp. Unlike Abbas, these young people despise security and civilian coordination with Israel, and are eager to establish a new all-Palestinian agenda, detached from the Oslo Accords, that will also include the Israeli Arab struggle for full civil equality. In recent weeks, Abbas is looking more and more as a version of Shukieri, who ended up as an exhausted man, who quarreled with most Arab leaders, until he finally retired, un-influential, from the PLO. At the same time, Hamas' activities and the "unaffiliated" push him and the Fatah elements loyal to him out of public legitimacy.

Abbas will not be able to ignore Hamas for long and block its entry into the PLO in the model agreed upon between the parties. Mainly because in addition to Hamas' support from Muslim countries such as Turkey, Iran and Qatar, it also has the support of the Palestinian public. It perceives Hamas as those who stood bravely in all the rounds of fighting against Israel, and especially in the latest operation. Hamas is on its way to gaining the upper hand at the PNC, along with the "unaffiliated."

Israel, led by Netanyahu, will then be able to roll its eyes and claim that there is no Palestinian partner for a permanent settlement, while ignoring the fact that it created this reality with its own hands. In the absence of an initiative by the Biden administration, adhering to sticking one's head in the sand, the conflict will be painted in religious shades, just as the extremists want, such as Bezalel Smutrich, Itamar Ben-Gvir and others. War of extermination. Us or them. Israel, along with the United States and Egypt, can still halt the process if it adopts the opposite policy, of strengthening the PLO and weakening Hamas. Such a policy could lead Hamas - which in recent years has shown signs of willingness to compromise - to integrate into a political process under the agreements the PLO has signed with Israel.