

A Tale of Two Palestinians

For slightly more than a decade, the two main areas slated for a future Palestinian state—the disputed territories and the Gaza Strip—have been ruled by competing factions, the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the Hamas terror group. While many in the international community continue to endorse the idea of a two-state solution, with Israelis living in peace alongside a contiguous and stable Palestinian state, the reality on the ground seemingly tells a different story.

The United Nations recently released a new report suggesting Gaza may become “unlivable” by 2020. According to the report, Gaza’s population is growing faster than the coastal territory’s infrastructure and economy, which are deteriorating more rapidly than expected.

“We predicted some years ago that Gaza would fast become unlivable on a host of indicators, and that deadline is actually approaching even faster than we predicted—from health access to energy to water,” Robert Piper, the U.N. coordinator for humanitarian aid and development activities, told AFP.

The report said Gaza’s 2 million population is projected to grow to 2.2 million by 2020 and is being squeezed as resources like food and clean water become scarcer and while pollution and energy shortages become more prevalent.

Israeli Ambassador to the U.N. Danny Danon said the U.N. report shows Hamas “has brought nothing but pain and destruction to the residents of Gaza.”

“The continued exploitation of humanitarian aid by this terrorist organization harms Palestinian civilians and sabotages the efforts of the international community,” he said.

Grant Rumley, a research fellow at the Foundation for Defense

of Democracies think tank and an expert on Palestinian politics, told the situation in Gaza is “dire” and similarly blamed Hamas. The terror group, Rumley said, has “squandered international aid to fuel their war preparations, using imported concrete to construct tunnels and other raw materials to make rockets. Gazans are well aware of this, but their options are limited.”

“A protest in January saw 10,000 take to the streets to protest Hamas’s handling of the electric crisis, and yet months later, the PA plunges the Strip into another electric crisis,” he said. “So I think Gazans feel that neither their local leadership in Hamas nor their West Bank leadership in the PA care for them.”

Yet Hillel Frisch, an expert on Palestinian and Islamic politics at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, dismissed what he called the “doomsday pronouncements” for Gaza.

“The truth is that life expectancy in Gaza is 74, five years above the world average, above the average in the Arab world and three years above life expectancy in Egypt,” Frisch told .

“Gaza is the second-most-subsidized population in the world, receiving 15 times more aid per capita than an Ethiopia, even though GDP per capita in Ethiopia is one-third that of Gaza’s ... At least 1/3 of the world’s population lives in much more dire straits than in Gaza,” he said.

The View From the Disputed Territories

At the same time, the humanitarian situation for Palestinians living in the disputed territories is “considerably better” due to closer economic cooperation with Israel, Frisch said.

“The situation in Judea and Samaria and in the West Bank is considerably better due to the fact that 150,000 workers from the West Bank work in Israel,” he said.

Frisch also noted the contrast in Gazans' employment situation between the early 1990s and today.

"In Gaza, Hamas terrorism killed the goose that laid the golden egg," he said. "Before the wave of terror in 1995-1996, more workers from Gaza proportionately were employed in Israel than workers from Judea and Samaria. Now there are none. This is where Hamas hurt the Gaza population most."

Rumley similarly pointed out the "serious gap" between the disputed territories and Gaza as a result of Hamas's preoccupation with terrorism.

"Hamas has oriented its governing structure towards fighting Israel while the PA has, at times, tried to set itself on a course for state-building," Rumley said.

Israel-PA Cooperation

Israel and the PA recently announced two major economic cooperation agreements, though peace negotiations between the parties have been stalled since 2014.

PA Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah and Israeli Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz both attended a ribbon-cutting ceremony July 10 to inaugurate the first Palestinian-owned power station.

"Israel is interested in improving the Palestinian economy, and here we have a project that is beneficial for both parties," Steinitz said.

A few days later, President Donald Trump's international negotiations representative, Jason Greenblatt, announced an agreement between Israel and the PA on a historic Red Sea-Dead Sea canal. The deal involves the sale of 33 million cubic meters (1.2 billion cubic feet) of water to the PA to relieve water shortages.

"Water is a precious commodity in the Middle East," said Greenblatt, adding that Israeli-Palestinian cooperation will

foster “economic improvement in the lives of the Palestinians.”

Rumley believes the recent announcements “are all positive steps.”

“There is more opportunity for incremental changes on the ground that positively impact the security for both sides than for a final status agreement,” he said. “I think the White House should continue to promote active measures like this that improve the quality of life for Palestinians and the security of Israelis.” {eoa}

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