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The Inevitable Role of Clans in Post-Conflict Stabilization in Gaza



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“Palestinian tribes, clans and families are not an alternative to any Palestinian political system.” This statement was made not by a Palestinian government official or an expert advisor on democratic reforms in Palestine. Rather, it was made by representatives of Gazan clans and families themselves. This emphatic denial came in response to assertions that the Israeli government seeks to promote these clans as future proxies following the end of combat operations in the territory.

The Israeli government has indeed considered this idea, which has in turn attracted fierce criticism from commentators across the political spectrum. Many of these criticisms are valid. But the outright dismissal of the clans as potential security and service providers ignores realities on the ground, where clans are already significant actors who have stepped in to fill the vacuum created by Hamas’s administrative withdrawal.

The question of clans' role in post-conflict Gaza has yet to gain any significant attention among policymakers outside of Israel and Palestine. However, experience in both the region and other post-conflict environments shows that the involvement of clans and tribes in post-conflict environments is inevitable.

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Day After Scenarios

The Israel Defense Forces' looming entrance into the city of Rafah, which Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has labelled as [Hamis' last stronghold](#) in the Gaza Strip, brings the conflict one day closer to the much-discussed "day after." The long-term challenge facing the Israeli government remains the need to control the security situation in the Strip without direct Israeli intervention while establishing a semblance of order. Primarily foreign but also Israeli observers have advocated the [return of the Palestinian Authority](#) to Gaza to run civilian affairs as the most reasonable solution.

Although the Palestinian Authority suffers from inherent weaknesses such as corruption and accusations from radical factions for collaborating with Israel, the [proponents](#) of this solution have highlighted that it is the only actor that can assume responsibility over Gaza, due to its connections with the Gazan population, familiarity with the territory, and the experience it has gained in governance and engagement with the Israeli authority. The Palestinian Authority's president, Mahmoud Abbas, has [signaled its readiness](#) to take on what might prove to be an unrewarding task, with the condition of renewing negotiations toward establishing a Palestinian state.

However, the Netanyahu government has adamantly [rejected](#) such plan, at least publicly. It has offered different justifications, but underlying cause is likely Netanyahu's disdain toward any move that might boost the case for Palestinian statehood.

What are the alternatives? After the invasion of Rafah, the Israeli government could remain in direct control over the Strip through the Israel Defense Forces. In another potential scenario, Hamas may be able to recuperate and, following an Israeli withdrawal, recapture parts of the Strip. Finally, in a scenario favored by some Israeli policymakers, an international task force led by Arab countries with which Israel has diplomatic relations (i.e., the United Arab Emirates and Egypt), the United States, and Europe takes over the mandate over Gaza.

Searching for further alternatives, the Israeli government has also contemplated the idea of delegating authority and power to some of the prominent clans in the Strip. Israeli security officials have already [approached clan leaders](#) and village mukhtars to explore the possibility of the clans filling in the vacuum after the Israel Defense Forces' possible withdrawal from the Strip. Israel has not officially declared this a policy. And it is not entirely clear how the clans would fulfill

their designated function: Will there be a council of clan and village leaders to run Gaza's affairs, or will each of the leading clans gain control over a territory? The Israeli government has not presented a blueprint for involving the clans.

Still, even before this policy has materialized, it had attracted fierce criticism. Some of the critiques of this strategy have warned that the clans (colloquially called *hamulas*) are “[a thing of the past](#).” These critics argue that ever since the first *intifada*, Palestinians have broken away from this kinship structure. Others have pointed to Israel's past attempts to establish a system of civilian governance in the West Bank based on local clans. The Village Leagues, as this system was named, [failed](#) to achieve its goals and dissolved ahead of the breakout of the first *intifada*. A more radical perspective has depicted this plan as essentially colonial, seeking to “[divide Gaza into emirates ruled by local tribes](#)” in the same way that colonial regimes had done in the past. Finally, observers have highlighted clan involvement in [illicit economic activities](#), including smuggling and human trafficking. Therefore, they have warned that affording clans a role in post-conflict Gaza [risks](#) deepening competition and rivalry between them and resulting in intensified criminal violence and warlordism.

Of all these scenarios, the Palestinian Authority's return to the Strip remains, despite Netanyahu's objections, the most likely. Direct Israeli control over Gaza will encounter [fierce international response](#) and will also constitute a burden on the Israeli economy. The return of Hamas, too, seems unlikely at this point. Israel has clearly fallen short of Netanyahu's initially declared goal of annihilating the organization, as Hamas pockets [continue attacking](#) Israeli forces inside and outside the Strip. Yet, Hamas has lost a significant proportion of its manpower and infrastructure, which will make it difficult to restore governance capabilities. Finally, Israel's partners in the Middle East have rejected any role that will not involve an indigenous Palestinian leadership, once again bringing the Palestinian Authority back into the picture.

But this does not mean that clans will not play a role in governing the strip. Given the realities on the ground, clans' involvement in any political and security activities in Gaza is inevitable. Any policy, including one that paves the way to the Palestinian Authority's return, should take into account the clans' prominent role in any political constellation in Gaza.

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History

The Israeli state has a long history of relying on clans and tribes to interact with and mobilize support from Arab populations under its control. In the 1940s, the Yishuv (the precursor to the State of Israel) used clan and tribal divisions to ally with [Druze](#) and [Bedouin](#) Arabs in the Mandate of Palestine, and Israel's early years saw the integration of Druze and many Bedouins into Israel's security forces. During Israel's first decades of existence and until the early 1980s, the dominant Mapai Party used [satellite lists](#) that incorporated clan notables and mukhtars as members of the Knesset to secure Arab votes.

The example of the [Village Leagues](#), which the critiques of Israel's clan policy in Gaza have brought up, is another episode in Israel's relations with Palestinian clans. The Village Leagues was an initiative by the Military Governorate in the West Bank to erect an indigenous conservative leadership as an alternative to the Palestine Liberation Organization's increasing influence the late 1970s. The Leagues, which the Israel Defense Forces initially funded, were made up of clan notables willing to cooperate with the Israeli authorities in return for securing the countryside's interests. Each League encompassed several villages and clans, and notables were given local administrative authority and weapons to protect themselves. Although these notables still committed to Palestinian nationalism and independence in the West Bank, their rivals blamed them for collaborating with Israel and targeted League leaders. The system eventually faded away, and the clans either relinquished their leadership claims or allied with the Palestine Liberation Organization in the years leading up to the first *intifada*. Since then, the Village Leagues have been used by critics as an example of the [failure](#) to rely on traditional social structures to control Palestine and as synonymous with the [betrayal of the Palestinian cause](#). And this memory has served Israel's critiques in downplaying reliance on clan leaders in Gaza.

On the other hand, one of the main reasons for the system's failure was that the Likud government [actively sabotaged](#) the initiative. The settler Gush Emunim lobby group feared any attempt to bolster a native leadership that might advance autonomy or even independence for the Palestinians. Therefore, its representative in the Likud and the Knesset pushed Prime Minister Menachem Begin and his Minister of Defense Ariel Sharon to cease supporting the initiative. In other words, the failure of the Village Leagues may have had much to do with Israeli reluctance to continue the policy as with the unpopularity of the system.

A different example is that of the South Lebanon Army, which served as Israel's proxy in the Security Belt in South Lebanon. As I show in my recent [research](#), Israel relied on family and clan structures to mobilize Shiite recruits who, by the late 1980s, became the majority of the South Lebanon Army's rank-and-file. The force is mainly remembered for its [precipitous collapse](#) following Israel's withdrawal from the Security Belt in May 2000. Nonetheless, for nearly two decades, it facilitated Israel's control of the Security Belt (which was more than double the size of the Gaza Strip but more sparsely populated) with a minimal Israel Defense Forces presence.

For Israel, then, resorting to the clan as a potential ally is almost a natural move embedded in historical experience.

Clans Today

How much influence do clans and their leadership still have? Looking at the Palestinians through the prism of clannism and tribalism risks reductionism. Palestinian society has indeed gone through significant social and economic changes, which had driven the urbanizing and better educated Palestinian away from traditional kinship structures. In many ways, Hamas' Islamist ideology also emerged as a radical alternative to clannism and tribalism.

On the other hand, entirely dismissing the relevance of clans to Palestinian politics and society may be too hasty. The drift from the clan [has not been linear](#). The clans still consist of hundreds of thousands of members. Ironically, after Israel's withdrawal from parts of the West Bank following the Oslo Accords, it was the Palestine Liberation Organization's leadership, now assuming key positions in the Palestinian Authority, that replaced the Israeli authorities in elevating clan leaders, integrating them into [positions of power](#) in the new administration. When the Palestinian Authority's administrative capacity collapsed during the second *intifada*, these were the clans that filled in the vacuum in providing security and services to local populations. In the [West Bank](#), the clans remained powerful even after Abbas succeeded Yasser Arafat as the Authority's president. These relations may have been dotted with tensions and contestation, with the Palestinian Authority sometimes able to curtail clans' opposition to its policies and subordinate clan leaders. Nonetheless, they show that the clan, as a social institution, is still relevant to Palestinian social and political life.

In Gaza, too, clans have remained active in society and local politics. The Gazan clans have not been monolithic in their policies and interaction with the other political actors. Some of the clans, for instance the Helles clan, remained loyal to Fatah even after Hamas had driven the Palestinian Authority out of Gaza following the 2006–2007 clashes between the two movements. The Helles and other Fatah-allied clans continued [clashing](#) sporadically with Hamas in the years following its takeover of Gaza. Other clans, such as the [Dogh mush](#), have claimed to have joined al-Qaeda and fought Hamas under the guise of this organization. Other clans, on the other hand, [have collaborated with Hamas](#) throughout the years, mainly to protect their lucrative smuggling and trafficking ventures. These relations have remained strained and occasional rifts and clashes have occurred, as well as cooperation.

Hence, the clans have remained a part of Palestinian politics, and their relations with the local leadership, whether the Palestinian Authority or Hamas, have remained complex but not irrelevant. Moreover, as Hamas was weakened following Israel's retaliation for the Oct. 7 onslaught, clan leaders once again have emerged forcefully in Gaza. Influential Gazan clans have been [securing and protecting aid convoys](#), distributing aid, and regulating other routine activities across the territory, including among the internally displaced population. At the same time, at least some of these clans have taken advantage of the chaos and the violence to [expand their criminal activities](#) and benefit, in addition to their smuggling operations, from looting the property left behind by displaced Gazans.

The rise of Palestinian clans at times of crisis fits with common trends in other cases. Past experience shows that the shortcomings or breakdown of modern states can actually strengthen and reconstitute the influence of “traditional” social structures like clans. Thus, during the civil wars that tore societies apart in [Syria](#) and [Iraq](#), tribes and clans experienced renewed cohesion. Similarly, in post-2001 [Afghanistan](#), tribal warlords in primarily non-Pashtun parts of the country regained the influence that they had lost with the rise of Taliban in the 1990s. In [Iraq](#) and [Syria](#), the governments grudgingly turned to these tribes for help in counter-insurgency operations, whereas in [Afghanistan](#), tribal strongmen became effective governors and partners to the central government in Kabul.

In light of these examples, the growing strength and cohesion of Gazan tribes is only natural at a time of a looming social crisis, and we may see more Gazans returning to the clan and tribe for protection. The [clans have already filled the vacuum](#) left by Hamas in their territories. With their possession of stockpiles of arms and ability to mobilize members in their turfs, clans may be the first ones to maintain a semblance of order and, given their interests and history, counter the remaining Hamas pockets in the Strip.

What's Next

In fact, clans are likely to play some part under any political constellation. If, in the less likely scenario that Hamas recovers and seeks to regain control over parts of the Strip, it is bound to encounter the now emboldened clans seeking to reassert their autonomy and retain their

smuggling routes. Any administration that may wish restore security in Gaza, including the Palestinian Authority, will need to take into account the clans' interests and influence.

The major clans, for their part, [have publicly denied](#) any interest in collaborating with Israel or agreeing to take over Gaza Strip. Thus, it is unlikely that any formal body will be created from clan leaders to run Gaza's political affairs. On the other hand, some clans have demonstrated their ability to coordinate their actions, [denying any affiliation with either Israel or Hamas](#) and reiterating their autonomy. Therefore, any Israeli plan to delegate authority and power to clan leaders will likely take be informal, with each clan securing control over its turf and smuggling routes in return for possible coordination against Hamas pockets. With reference to past examples, clan participation after the end of fighting looks more like an informal Village Leagues system than the South Lebanon Army.

Delegating authority to clan leaders is certainly a short-term solution and would not prevent the possible return of the Palestinian Authority. However, an Authority-led administration, too, would find itself bargaining with clans. After nearly two decades of absence and amid the destruction of Gaza, the Palestinian Authority will need a basis for its security infrastructure. And this is where its experience of dealing with West Bank clans and its relations with Gazan clans would prove useful. Some clans may indeed see this as an opportunity to expand their criminal activities.

On the other hand, previous examples suggest that marginalizing the clans or attempting to subdue them may not only miss an opportunity for constructive engagement but also drive them to search for other opportunities. In Iraq, for example, Nuri al-Maliki's antipathy toward the tribes that fought against al-Qaeda ended up [driving disaffected tribe members](#) to collaborate with the Islamic State.

Any administration that will emerge in Gaza, whether an interim Israeli one, a Palestinian Authority-led one, or even a recovered Hamas government, will only be able to cope with clans' potential criminal activity through securing their participation in the institutions designed by civilian authorities.

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