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‘We need a joint vision about the future’

Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki on the expulsion from Gaza, Israel’s war aims and a possible ceasefire

After four months of war in Gaza, Israel announced a ground invasion of the city of Rafah. The German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock has issued an urgent warning, calling the impending attacks a humanitarian catastrophe. How do you assess the situation in the Gaza Strip?

I agree with Baerbock that the situation is very dire — it is more than dire. So far, countries have refrained from calling what is happening in Gaza, for the last 129 days, what we see as a genocide. The attack on Rafah will prove that a genocide is taking place. Only last week, in order to free two hostages, Israeli forces killed 126 Palestinians, the majority of them children and women, injured more than 200 and targeted 50 localities in Rafah alone. It is very clear that Israel does not abide by its obligations according to international law and that they commit all types of crimes in order to achieve their objectives. The situation is unfolding to a humanitarian catastrophe that the world is watching on television. It is very important that countries do not just issue such statements but take actions. Statements will not provide the security and protection that the innocent people in Gaza deeply need.

While the world looks at Gaza, the West Bank is getting out of sight. How is the situation there?

The occupying forces, the Israeli army and armed groups of settlers terrorise the civilians and are committing all kinds of crimes against Palestinians in the West Bank. They are taking advantage of the world’s focus on Gaza. Atrocities such as confiscating land, demolishing homes, uprooting trees, killing innocent people and terrorising families or school kids happen on a daily basis. These crimes are well coordinated between soldiers and settlers — soldiers

are always there to intervene and to protect settlers from any kind of reaction from the local Palestinians. It always ends with the beating of Palestinians, by detaining them or confiscating their properties. This has to end. Any kind of reaction from the international community should also address the situation in the West Bank.

Israel declared that its goal is to destroy Hamas. After the massacres of 7 October, what choices does Israel have?

There are declared objectives, and there are undeclared ones. Israel's declared goals are unattainable — in the first days, they were talking about wiping out Hamas, later about eliminating the capabilities of Hamas, and now, they talk about taking Hamas' weapons. Destroying Hamas is not attainable, and the release of hostages alive is also not really feasible under the current heavy bombardments. Israel knows this.

However, the undeclared objectives – making Gaza uninhabitable, the forced displacement of Palestinians out of Gaza, massive killing of Palestinians, in particular children and women, the total collapse of public services, the health system, the education system – were attained by the Israeli army in the first months. And they continue the war.

This means that Hamas is going to stay as a political actor. How do you see the future of a Palestinian autonomous government? Are Fatah and Hamas negotiating about a technocrat government?

There is no difference between West Bank and Gaza, and the Palestinian Authority is responsible in both places. We, the Palestinian Authority, will not accept talking about anything until the war ends, until there is a permanent ceasefire. Only then we can talk about bringing back services and activating our personnel in Gaza. In order for us to be able to take up our responsibility as the authority in Gaza and look into ways how to start providing the type of services that people mostly need, it is essential that the international community presses for a ceasefire and an ending of the war.

What can a security order for Gaza look like after the war? And how can Hamas be controlled?

This is something we are ready to discuss — under the notion that the PA has full authority, not only in terms of providing services but also in terms of providing security. Obviously, we need to rebuild the capacity, we need to train people. For that, we need the support from a number of countries, and we are open to ways on how to do that. Maybe a transition period is necessary before we reach the capacity to

fully take over security, but ultimately, the Palestinian Authority must be in control. The Palestinian Authority is the sole representative of people both in Gaza and the West Bank.

What do you need from your international partners in the Arab world and in the West?

From the Arab world, we need political and financial support when it comes the reconstruction after the war. They accept their responsibility, especially the Gulf states. But aside from a 'Marshall plan' for Gaza, there is something else: we need a joint vision about the future. We are working closely with the Arabs, coordinating with them and trying to present a way to move from where we are today towards where we want to see the whole region in the future. The Arab states can give the leverage to present such a political vision to the US and the EU — who in turn can get the Israelis to talk to us about the future.

This interview was conducted by Alexander Isele.



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Riyad al-Maliki has been Foreign Minister of the Palestinian Territories since 2007. He is a former professor and head of the Department of Civil Engineering at Birzeit University. He was also the founder and director of Panorama, the Palestinian Centre for the Propagation of Democracy and Community Development.