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**The PLO Central Council Convention:**  
**Impasse with Possible Opportunity**

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The climax of the recent PLO Central Council convention, which began on January 14, 2018 in Ramallah, was the speech by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. On the following day, the Council passed several resolutions that in effect are recommendations to the PLO Executive Committee, the organization's executive body. Most of the resolutions were in the spirit of Abbas's recommendations in his speech and resonated of past resolutions.

The speech was no harbinger of any substantive change in Abbas's policy, which rejects the use of terror as an operational strategy – as it harms Palestinian interests – and advocates a popular struggle and the delegitimization of Israel. Despite the sharp rhetoric, the declaration regarding the “death” of the Oslo peace process, and the claim that the Palestinian Authority has been pushed into a position where it has no real sovereign power (even if the term “under occupation” was not used), Abbas's speech left the door open to negotiations and refrained from endorsing proposals of prominent Council members to abandon the idea of two states in favor of one state, with equal rights for all citizens. At the same time, Abbas emphasized his clear preference that the international community lead the political process, on the model of the group of states that negotiated the nuclear agreement with Iran, contending that the United States has ceased to be an unbiased mediator. Abbas was highly critical of the current US administration, hurling insults, inter alia, at US Ambassador to Israel David Friedman and US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley. He reiterated his intention to continue the PA's efforts to join several international organizations and strive for recognition of a Palestinian state by the Security Council.

Abbas's speech highlighted the Palestinian narrative that identifies Zionism and Israel as an illegitimate colonialist plot devised by the Western powers; this narrative ignores the historical-national connection of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel. Abbas views the US administration's initiative toward renewal of a political process that in the Palestinians' view ignores the issues of Jerusalem and the refugees as a continuation of the same conspiracy, and therefore rejects it out of hand. Against the backdrop of Abbas's disappointment with the US administration and the pragmatic Sunni Arab Quartet's meager support for the Palestinian cause, and given his skepticism regarding the prospects of the reconciliation process between Fatah and Hamas, his speech presented a decidedly

selective historical survey and a self-adulatory record as president of the Palestinian Authority and chairman of the PLO.

The Central Council's resolutions following Abbas's speech reflect a decidedly defiant approach, as well as dismay and exasperation. However, as in the past, it is extremely doubtful if the PLO Executive Council will adopt the resolutions and implement them word for word. Abbas, as chairman of the Executive Council, is empowered to take the necessary action to implement the resolutions as mandated by circumstances. However, the chances are that this time too he will be in no rush to implement them, in view of the risk their implementation poses to the future and to the very survival of the Palestinian Authority, which is a distinct interest of Abbas and the PLO seniors who support him.

The frustration and animosity toward the US administration, perceived as prejudiced and even hostile, have intensified, given the possibility that Congress will pass a law to cut funding to the Palestinian Authority due to the stipends it allots to security prisoners and their relatives (the Taylor Force Act). At this time, with the Palestinian leadership totally disheartened with the US administration and with leading Arab states, its only hope is to mobilize the international community, especially the European Union, to help relieve the monetary crisis and achieve recognition of an independent Palestinian state within the pre-1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital. The change in the American position regarding the financial aid was already manifest in the administration's resolution to cut \$65 million from its funding to UNRWA in the coming quarter. Presumably, the cutback will affect at first UNRWA activity outside PA areas, although at a later stage, it could affect UNRWA activity in the PA too, unless the European Union and others fill in the gap created.

The fact that Hamas and Islamic Jihad representatives chose not to attend the convention cast a dark shadow on its proceedings; they also vehemently attacked Abbas and the Palestinian Authority leadership for maintaining ties with Israel, particularly the security cooperation. The picture emerging is one of an impasse in the relations between Fatah and the Palestinian Authority on the one hand and the Palestinian opposition organizations on the other, coupled with the ongoing deterioration in the reality of life in the Gaza Strip and the growing isolation of the Gaza Strip from the West Bank.

These internal Palestinian circumstances, along with the choice of the Palestinian leadership to sever itself from the US administration and intensify its defiant approach, compel Israel to draw a clear strategic distinction between the Gaza Strip, where a hostile state entity has consolidated its rule on the one hand, and the West Bank on the other. The Hamas state entity in Gaza can be hostile and functional, deterred from using military force against Israel, or hostile, ineffectual, and violent vis-à-vis Israel. It is in Israel's interest to

ensure the first possibility prevails, since a violent confrontation could drag Israel into reoccupying the Gaza Strip in order to topple the Hamas government, with no viable alternative in sight, apart from an Israeli military government. With all the implications and costs (not only monetary) this would entail. The possibility of helping the Palestinian Authority regain full control of the Gaza Strip and promoting rehabilitation of the Strip by means of the Palestinian Authority and not by Hamas has never been a realistic option, even during the better days of the reconciliation process; it is even less realistic now since the Central Council convention.

In order to guarantee a scenario preferable to Israel in the Gaza Strip, one must recognize the Gaza Strip as a state entity with Hamas as its sovereign power. Activities with Hamas can be conducted through understandings and cooperation, without necessitating signed agreements or a permanent settlement (which is currently unobtainable), while retaining military deterrence. The purpose of the cooperation, which would be reflected, *inter alia*, in building infrastructures and granting work permits in Israel in a controlled manner, is to improve the humanitarian situation and rehabilitate the area, in order to bolster military deterrence and reduce the risk of a violent conflagration. In parallel, steps should be taken to modify UNRWA's mandate, limiting it to vital humanitarian aid in defined and controlled projects, even if at the price of more significant financial aid, and the transfer of the remaining authorities to the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip without financial support.

In the West Bank, Israel will have to formulate a strategy based on understandings between Israel and the US administration and the pragmatic Sunni Arab camp, notably Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. A historical strategic window of opportunity has come Israel's way that may be a one-time occurrence: a sympathetic US administration, willing to change the rules of the game and dissociate itself from consensus that met the demands of the Palestinian leadership and preconditions for resumption of the political process. The pragmatic Sunni camp also sides with the US and supports its initiative; it no longer regards the Palestinian cause as a prime or urgent issue and understands the importance of strengthening a regional camp against Iran's regional aspirations and the Salafi jihadi terror threats.

However, the impasse that the Palestinian system finds itself in will not benefit Israel's strategic interests in the long term. In the short term, Israel can exploit the Palestinian weakness, continue to establish new facts on the ground, and enjoy a feeling of achievement or advantage. However, in a longer perspective, Israel might find itself losing out, in view of the burden it will have to bear in the Gaza Strip and the need to reorganize the control mechanisms in the West Bank in the event the Palestinian Authority collapses or suffers from severe functional deficiencies. Moreover, Israel might widen the gap with

European countries, and be caught up with unnecessary confrontations with the US administration, which will seek to restrain it, even if more sympathetically than the Obama administration.

The Israeli leadership, therefore, must translate the declared willingness to advance the two-state solution into a more limited setup, which while preserving its vital interests, also retains the possibility for realizing this idea in the future, circumstances permitting. The move must be based on understandings with the US administration and a broadened support base of the pragmatic Sunni camp. This will present the Palestinians with the choice of either accepting a long term controlled interim settlement along the lines of a Palestinian state within temporary borders (in the absence of any possibility for a permanent settlement under the current political conditions), or rejecting it, with all the implications this would involve, including international acknowledgment of Palestinian recalcitrance.