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Following Abbas' Letter to Netanyahu: Options Available to the Palestinian Authority

Ehud Eilam

The anticipated meeting between Benjamin Netanyahu and Salam Fayyad did not take place, and by all indications, the meeting with Saeb Erekat and the Palestinian intelligence chief did not produce any significant results. According to most estimates, there is no serious chance of a breakthrough in peace talks during 2012. It is widely believed that the letter from Mahmoud Abbas to Netanyahu was intended to create a political foundation for measures to be taken by the PA in response to what they refer to as a stalemate in the political process. The question is what options – more or less likely – are available to the Palestinians in the near future. This article reviews a number of alternatives available to Abbas and the Fatah leadership, and considers the prospects of their realization.

- a. The PA may attempt to resume direct negotiations or to make initial contact towards an agreement or partial agreement with Israel while seeking help from Egypt, which has proven itself in this role during and following the Mubarak era. If Egypt was able to mediate between Hamas and the PA, and between Israel and Islamic Jihad in a flare up in mid March 2012, it can certainly mediate between Israel and the PA. For example, an agreement that leads to the release of prisoners would increase Fatah support among Palestinians, and would be of great importance if it precedes the struggle against Hamas in the PA elections – if indeed such elections take place.
- b. The PA can turn to the UN General Assembly and request to upgrade its status from observer to non-member state. It probably will not be difficult to obtain a large majority for this proposal in the General Assembly. This step reflects the Palestinian leadership's decision not to declare a Palestinian state unilaterally, because it considers that such a declaration would not be to its advantage.
- c. The PA could turn to international institutions and file lawsuits against Israel. Implementing the second scenario would greatly facilitate such a move.

- d. The PA may resort to more severe moves against Israel, for example, by instigating a popular struggle. Marwan Barghouti, a prominent Palestinian leader who might be the successor of Mahmoud Abbas, supports this approach.
- e. The PA may also instigate a limited armed conflict. The PA has thousands of trained and equipped security personnel who have operational experience and are highly familiar with the area, assets in a conflict with Israel. However, it is very possible that the PA will not wish to expose its security forces to IDF retaliation, and will therefore, as in the past, project an ostensibly separation between its security forces and those undertaking acts of guerrilla warfare and terrorism. Still, such a policy may damage the PA image. The likelihood of this scenario materializing is low since the Palestinian leadership has adopted a policy that opposes the renewal of violence and supports only a popular struggle.
- f. The PA may take action on the diplomatic and military level, which will push Israel to topple the PA and take control over most or all of PA territory. The PA would thereby aim to mobilize world and in particular Arab public opinion to support it and bring about an international initiative to resume negotiations while putting pressure on Israel, and at best, return to the center of attention, certainly among the Arab states and ideally on the international stage. This would be a gamble designed to upgrade the PA to statehood status even at the risk of destroying the PA and all its achievements.
- g. The PA could dismantle itself and request international and Arab sponsorship and protection and/or again impose on Israel responsibility over the West Bank, even while calling for the establishment of a bi-national state in all of Israel. The PA could pressure Israel by abdicating its responsibilities and sowing anarchy, even at the price of harming the services provided to the Palestinian population. Naturally, in a situation like this the Palestinian security forces would crumble, thus enabling Hamas and other extreme organizations such as Islamic Jihad to carry out attacks against Israel, and not necessarily only in Judea and Samaria. Further, the former PA security units, if only out of frustration at losing their jobs, could turn their anger against Israel. This would be particularly serious in light of their skill and possession of arms.

The PA may wait before implementing any of these options until the appropriate time, depending on the events that are likely to occur by the end of the year.

The Regional and International Factor

The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, despite its ties with Hamas and its need to deal with urgent economic problems, is likely to be responsive to the PA. Its ability to help the PA will increase after it gains strength in Egypt, for example, if it sets up a government under its control and/or a candidate of its choice is elected president in the upcoming elections.

Israel may attack Iran in the coming months, despite opposition in the West and the US. If the diplomatic, economic, and military consequences harm the West and the US, tension is likely to result, perhaps even a crisis that might weaken and isolate Israel. The PA is capable of exploiting this development.

In the US, Obama could lose the presidential election on November 6, 2012, which would leave him two months as President before his departure from the White House. Obama has expressed his support for a Palestinian state and his current reserved position on the issue stems from the Palestinian boycott of talks as well as timing – the upcoming presidential elections. If Obama is not re-elected, the frustration at having failed to fulfill policy goals such as regarding the Palestinian issue might be leveled to the Israeli government. He will also be disappointed in American Jews if they do not support him to the extent that he expected. Therefore, he might not oppose steps taken by the PA in the UN. This would have great importance in light of the weight of American support for Israel in the UN in general, and in the Security Council in particular.

All in all, the PA has a few options: direct or indirect talks with Israel; turning to international institutions; popular struggle; armed conflict (even though the likelihood of that scenario is low); and self-dismantlement. The PA can threaten or carry out, partially or fully, one option after another or several together. For example, a popular struggle could be a way to pressure Israel to make concessions during indirect negotiations via Egypt.

Another important aspect is the timing of a Palestinian move. Israel must be prepared on all levels for all possible options and try to thwart them, especially the worst of them, through diplomatic initiative that is coordinated with the West in general and the United States in particular.

