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The Palestinian “Internationalization” Strategy: End of the Road?

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Some eight years ago, when the Netanyahu government replaced the Olmert government and Barack Obama assumed the United States presidency, the Palestinians adopted an “internationalization strategy.” This choice reflected the Palestinian skepticism about the possibility of bridging the gaps with Israel (including with Olmert’s far reaching proposals) and the hope that the international community would accept their tripartite demand: (1) establishment of a Palestinian state (2) on the basis of the 1967 borders (3) with East Jerusalem as its capital. The Palestinians hoped to achieve this without having to contribute the minimum demanded by Israel for achievement of an agreement: committing to an end of conflict and finality of claims; waiving the right of return; and agreeing to security arrangements that to some extent would limit their sovereignty. The Palestinians pursued measures to prompt the international community to establish a Palestinian state as per the outline they wanted, but without negotiations with Israel and without the concessions necessary in order to achieve an agreement through negotiations.

The Palestinian internationalization strategy was bolstered by a public relations effort to implant the Palestinian narrative of the reasons for the conflict and the “just way of solving it,” and to saddle Israel with responsibility for the political deadlock. This was joined by general efforts to delegitimize Israel. This strategy, which focuses on a persistent systematic, effort to blacken Israel in international institutions, undermine its legitimacy, and deny the historic national connection of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel, has scored several notable achievements in recent years.

During the Obama administration, Israeli and Palestinian leaders did not return to direct talks, despite the temporary freeze on Israeli construction in the West Bank that President Obama succeeded in imposing on the Israeli government; despite the mediation efforts of the President’s special envoy, former Senator George Mitchell; and despite the mediation efforts of King Abdullah of Jordan. One of the prominent achievements by the Palestinian national movement was the 2012 UN General Assembly resolution defining Palestine as a “non-member observer state.”

Furthermore, the Palestinians succeeded in entrenching within the US administration the belief that Israel’s settlement policy in the West Bank was the main obstacle to an agreement. In this

sense President Obama’s Cairo University speech of May 2009 was a convenient point of departure. Two subsequent extremely important diplomatic achievements were the administration’s decision to abstain in the December 23, 2016 UN Security Council vote, which passed Resolution 2334 establishing that the 1967 borders were the basis for negotiations (in contrast to Resolution 242, which requires an Israel withdrawal from “territories” occupied in 1967), and the speech given by John Kerry at the conclusion of his tenure as Secretary of State, which he chose to devote to the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

The confidence gained by the Palestinians with their political and diplomatic achievements over the years was reflected in the threats against the Trump administration should it carry out the President’s campaign pledge to transfer the US embassy to Jerusalem. Senior Palestinian officials threatened the administration that they would “make its life miserable” in UN institutions, and that the entire Middle East would explode in a wave of violence. PLO Secretary General Saeb Erekat even threatened to cancel recognition of Israel, and to give the keys to the Palestinian Authority to Israel. Overall, it appears that the Palestinians are having difficulty in internalizing two major changes that have made their internationalization strategy much less relevant: the Trump administration is not committed to the Palestinians to the same degree as was the Obama administration, and the Israeli narrative is closer to the outlook of the current administration than the Palestinian narrative.

In addition, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has become less important in the Arab world and in the international community. Indeed, for several years the Palestinian issue has not led the agenda of Arab leaders, who are preoccupied by acute problems in their respective states and the region at large that have far reaching geopolitical consequences. The fact that Israel is a source of stability and an ally in the struggle against Iran on the one hand and against the Islamic State on the other, combined with the weakening of US support for regimes in the region, particularly Egypt and Saudi Arabia, has altered their prioritization of the conflict. Furthermore, the challenges encountered by the major powers in dealing with other disputes and conflicts in the Middle East, led by the civil war in Syria, instability in Yemen and Iraq, the strengthening of Hezbollah, and the increased influence of Iran and Russia in the Middle East, also currently undermine the effectiveness of the Palestinian strategy. Ten million Syrian refugees, a humanitarian disaster in Yemen, and instability in Iraq and Libya have shunted the Palestinian issue to the region’s political sidelines.

Israel’s interest is that the United States, and not the international community, which has accepted the Palestinian narrative practically in toto, should lead the international effort to address regional issues, including the Israeli-Palestinian issue. It is therefore important for Israel to coordinate an official response on the Palestinian question with the US administration, while changing the rules of the game that the Palestinians have managed to impose in recent years. There is likely to be a greater and more concrete ability of the United States to spearhead this

issue now, thanks to a more resolute policy by the new President, the joint recognition of priorities, and the joint formulation of a relevant strategy.

With the consolidation of the new administration in the White House, which appears to be open to new ideas, Israel therefore has an opportunity, in coordination with this administration, to reshape the range of possibilities concerning the Palestinian issue as an element in a broad regional strategy. The Trump administration has already declared that the Israeli-Palestinian issue should be returned to the negotiating table in the framework of a bilateral dialogue, and that it does not accept unilateral anti-Israeli dictates at the UN or in the Quartet. The administration does not favor continued construction in the settlements or Israeli annexation of territory in the West Bank, but at the same time, it does not accept the Palestinian argument that Israel and the settlements are the obstacle to peace.

Israel's interest requires coordination and understanding with the United States on what are truly significant challenges in the region: Iranian subversion and terrorism, the conflict in Syria, the need to strengthen Egypt and Jordan as stabilizing elements, and the failed states in the region, which can potentially cause instability and undermine regional security, including in the international system (particularly in Europe). The Israeli-Palestinian issue should thus be assigned a lower priority than it received during the Obama administration, with a joint Israeli-American effort to persuade the Palestinians of the futility of the internationalization strategy.

The new priority assigned to the conflict and the efforts to reach a settlement are not designed to strengthen the status quo – on the contrary. Paradoxically, the Palestinian internationalization strategy, the Palestinian refusal to advance to the second stage of the Roadmap, i.e., temporary borders for the future Palestinian state, and the all or nothing position of the two sides on the core issues have prevented progress toward a solution to the conflict. Making it unmistakably clear to the Palestinians that they must return to the negotiating process and mutual give and take, and also accept transitional and interim arrangements as preferable alternatives to the status quo will engender greater potential for progress than during the Obama administration.

As an initial sign to the Palestinians that the rules of the game have changed, moving the American embassy to Jerusalem is in order. An American retreat from this pledge, even if in a flexible and creative format, as a result of the Palestinian threat aimed at preventing this measure, will weaken the American stature, and become an incentive for the Palestinians to adhere to a strategy of bypassing Israel and evading direct negotiations. Initial signs interpreted by the Palestinians as an American retreat from this promise have already led senior Palestinian figures to announce their intention to continue to target Israel in the international theater and promote a Security Council resolution on the illegality of the settlements, this time under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter, even though it is clear that this time the US will veto it. It is therefore important for the United States to uphold the promise to move the embassy to Jerusalem, while underscoring that its location in the western part of the city on territory not

subject to dispute, which will remain under Israeli sovereignty in any settlement, is a sovereign American decision, and does not indicate a retreat by the United States from its traditional position about determining the future of East Jerusalem through negotiations between the parties.

The consolidation of the new administration in the United States, the unease among the Israeli public with the existing situation in the Palestinian context, and the room for maneuver in this context available to the Israeli leadership create a unique opportunity to fashion a new Israeli policy for dealing with the conflict with the Palestinians, and for coordinating this policy with the United States. This strategy should rest on the neutralization of the Palestinian internationalization strategy and incentives to the Palestinians to return to direct negotiations with Israel in order to achieve a settlement on the basis of a two nation-state solution. These must be accompanied by three principal requirements: a specific time framework for the Palestinians to return to the negotiating table; a Palestinian commitment to an orderly and responsible process of state building (institutions, economy, a monopoly of force, enforcement of law and order), in order to ensure that the Palestinian state that arises will be a functional and not a failed state; and an end to incitement and monetary support for terrorists imprisoned in Israel and for the families of terrorists who were killed.

It is important that the United States clarify that if the Palestinians prefer to continue their effort to isolate Israel in the international theater, instead of returning to direct negotiations during the allotted period, it will back independent measures by Israel for determining its border in accordance with Israel's strategic interests, while preserving the possibility of future implementation of a negotiated two nation-state solution. In this way, Israel can prepare for disengage from the Palestinians, while retaining the settlement blocs and the Jordan Valley and the possibility of security operations throughout the West Bank. At the same time, territorial contiguity for the Palestinian entity and the undisturbed movement from the northern to the southern West Bank should be promoted and permitted. In addition, the international community and Israel will take action to develop the Palestinian infrastructure and economy, including through allocation of parts of Area C for these defined purposes.

Findings from a public opinion survey on national security matters conducted recently by the Institute for National Security Studies indicate that the majority of the Israeli public opposes a continuation of the existing situation or annexation of territory. Only 10 percent support annexation of all of Judea and Samaria, and 17 percent favor the continuation of the existing situation. Sixty-one percent of the public favor a settlement, be it a permanent agreement or an interim agreement in advance of a permanent agreement. As the Israeli public wants a change, the Israeli leadership has the flexibility and room for maneuver in this matter. Coordination with the United States under the special circumstances created will make it possible to disarm the Palestinian threats and the Palestinian internationalization strategy, assign the Palestinian issue a more balanced position on the regional and global agenda, and shape a more suitable security and strategic situation for Israel as a Jewish and democratic, secure, and just state.