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**Is the PLO Still the “Sole Representative of the Palestinian People”?**

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**Despite ongoing efforts to improve relations between Fatah and Hamas, there is no serious hope of reconciliation between them in the foreseeable future. Noteworthy against this background are the attempts by Hamas and other opposition organizations to challenge both the PLO's standing as the sole representative of the Palestinian people, and the senior standing of Fatah within the PLO. The Palestinian public, which saw the PLO as its sole representative, understands that it can no longer ignore the dominance of Hamas, which has competed with Fatah for their hearts and minds since 1987. For its part, Fatah is very concerned about this development, and sees this very way of thinking as an existential threat to the "great enterprise" that it has created. It seems that after all of the attempts and historic steps taken by the PLO, as well as the failures that the Palestinian arena has experienced, there is increasingly broad public recognition that there is no choice but to agree on combining the two strategies of struggle – those of Fatah and Hamas. Fatah is loath to accept this reality of a "tie" that harms its standing and paralyzes the Palestinian system. Nonetheless, it will be hard for the PLO to continue to serve as "the sole representative of the Palestinian people," and in turn, the Palestinian Authority, as an internal Palestinian government, will be weakened further. The undermining of the Palestinian arena's stability and the increased tension between the camps will pose a security challenge for Israel that it has not faced in recent years.**

Since the failure of Egypt's most recent effort to reconcile between Fatah and Hamas, the tension between the two leading Palestinian factions has intensified greatly. On December 22, 2018, Abu Mazen announced the dissolution of the Palestinian Legislative Council, where Hamas has held a majority since the 2006 elections. On January 6, 2019, he instructed the Palestinian Authority staff at Rafah to leave the border crossing, which forced Egypt to close the crossing and return to the arrangement that existed in practice before the return of the PA officials in October 2017, i.e., opening the crossing infrequently for short periods of time. Since then, the discourse between the PA and Hamas has deteriorated: fraught with mutual accusations and antagonism, it is marked by unwillingness to renew the dialogue.

This tension surfaced at a conference of the Palestinian factions held in Moscow on February 12-13, 2019 at the invitation of the Russian Foreign Ministry. Islamic Jihad opposed issuing a joint statement at the end of the conference, succeeded in persuading Hamas to this effect, and blocked any announcement, to the dismay of the hosts. Inter

alia, Islamic Jihad and Hamas refused to note in the statement that "the PLO is the sole representative of the Palestinian people." Islamic Jihad contended that the PLO has changed and that it would be possible to join it and see it as the sole national representative only if it undertakes a reorganization and returns to the "right path," meaning, cancels the Palestinian declaration of independence and the Oslo Accords, and gives up on the political achievements it has accumulated thus far. In contrast, Azzam al-Ahmad, the chair of the Fatah delegation to these talks and a member of the PLO's Executive Committee, claimed that recognizing the PLO cannot be conditional, and that the PLO, with all of its commitments and signed agreements, is the sole organization; he also called the Islamic Jihad members ignorant boors. The fact that Hamas was swayed by Islamic Jihad – an organization lower on the hierarchy of organizations than Hamas – is surprising, since there is a rivalry between them that has sparked conflict on more than one occasion. The rivalry between them revolves in part around changes that have taken place in recent years in Hamas's approach to the PLO, reflected in its most recent political platform published on May 17, 2018, which states that "the PLO is the national framework for all Palestinians."

The prevailing sense is that despite the ongoing efforts to improve relations between Fatah and Hamas, there is no longer hope of reconciliation in the foreseeable future. Noteworthy against this background are the attempts by Hamas and other opposition organizations to challenge the PLO's standing as the sole representative of the Palestinian people, and the senior standing of Fatah within the PLO. Fatah for its part is very concerned about this development, finds it hard to believe that there are those who would even consider undermining the PLO's traditional "sacred" status, sees this very way of thinking as an existential threat to the "great enterprise" that it has created, and rejects these calls outright, which, according to the organization's spokespeople, have been voiced by inexperienced people.

However, a new line was crossed that had not been tested previously, even during the Arab Spring years. Protesters in the Gaza Strip, encouraged and organized by Hamas, have held demonstrations that included calls for the removal of Abu Mazen. The call "arhal" – "get out!" – which was chanted in the demonstrations in Tahrir Square in Cairo against the Husni Mubarak regime is also chanted in the streets of Gaza. Although this call stems from the frustration and anger that has built up toward Abu Mazen for not paying the salaries of officials in Gaza and cutting the budgets, from the perspective of Fatah, the Palestinian Authority, and the PLO, this development is a dangerous precedent. Even if this call does not create momentum that brings out masses of protesters, it creates a dangerous dynamic that could undermine the recognition of the PLO as the sole representative of the "Palestinian problem" and the ability to translate this recognition into political processes. Hamas also manages its own independent foreign policy, and

reminds audiences at every forum that Abu Mazen or the representative of the PLO and/or of the PA does not represent the Palestinian people, thus increasing the inter-organizational tension in the Palestinian arena.

Likewise in the background of the rivalry is the policy enacted over the past two years by the Trump administration and for some time by Israel too, which considerably weakens the Palestinian Authority, empties it of content, and strengthens Hamas and the PA's other domestic rivals. The Trump administration has in effect adopted Israel's position on the issue of the conflict with the Palestinians, cut almost all United States aid to the Palestinians, cancelled the budget that previous administrations had provided to UNRWA, and thus in essence determined that the refugee problem exists only to a minimal extent. In addition, in moving the American embassy to Jerusalem, the Trump administration adopted a position much closer to Israel's than to that of the Palestinians. Since then, the relationship between Abu Mazen and the Trump administration has been severely damaged. The administration's rhetoric toward him is extremely critical and casts him as one who delays and blocks peace, rather than as a leader seeking an agreement – as others in the international community see him. For his part, Abu Mazen has expressed a lack of trust in the Trump administration on a number of occasions, and stated that it can no longer be an exclusive sponsor or mediator in any negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. In addition, Abu Mazen refuses to meet the administration's envoys to the Middle East, struggles against them via the Arab countries, and in effect has removed himself from the sphere of American influence.

It is true that the other Palestinian factions respect Abu Mazen for his opposition to ideas emerging from the Trump administration. Khaled Mashal, former chairman of Hamas's political bureau, even said recently that Abbas is admirable for how he has confronted American policy. However, there is an increasing realization that the PLO does not have any power without American and Israeli backing, and it is simply losing its relevance. On February 26, Hani al-Masri, a well-respected and widely-read writer who is not considered an associate of Abu Mazen or of the Islamic stream, called for refraining from the dangerous chants of "arhal" toward Abu Mazen, but at the same time called on Fatah, the central organization in the PLO, to realize that it is no longer a first among equals and that the parity between the two major factions in the Palestinian movement requires that it stop acting independently.

Fatah, however, is loath to accept this reality of a "tie" that harms its standing and paralyzes the Palestinian system. Abu Mazen continues to demand Hamas's complete subordination to the Palestinian Authority: "one government, one weapon, one law." He believes that only Palestinian unity will be able to cope with Trump's "deal of the century." Despite his awareness that only Israeli, American, and inter-Arab backing can

strengthen his demand for unity of arms and government, he is adhering to the international commitments that the PLO took upon itself and fears the Lebanonization of the Palestinian arena, which would not enable meeting these commitments. Over the past year, Abu Mazen's fears have increased regarding what he sees as an American attempt, backed by Israel, to establish an independent Palestinian entity in the Gaza Strip alone, instead of seeking to renew negotiations over all of Areas B and C as required by the Oslo Accords. Hamas for its part is adhering to the distinction between "the arms of resistance" that it is unwilling to give up "as long as the occupation continues," and the other weapon, i.e., policing and protecting public order, which it has no interest in. Its leadership believes that it has popular support for this position, but is concerned about the economic pressure from Abu Mazen, to which it has not yet found a solution.

This, then, is a reality that the PLO has never experienced. The Palestinian public, which saw the organization as its sole representative, understands that it can no longer ignore the dominance of Hamas, which has competed with Fatah for their hearts and minds since 1987. It seems that after all of the attempts and historic steps taken by the PLO, as well as the failures that the Palestinian arena has experienced, there is increasingly broad public recognition that there is no choice but to agree on combining the two strategies of struggle – those of Fatah and Hamas. The issue of "the day after Abu Mazen" focuses mainly on the question of which path will lead the Palestinian people, and not the question of who will inherit his various jobs.

The Trump administration input into this discussion is critical, due to its substantive encouragement to Abu Mazen's rivals. Without Israeli backing and American support, the base that Abu Mazen and the PLO leadership had used to maneuver has been pulled out from under their legs. It seems that the political stalemate will deepen, and without a real achievement for the Palestinians in the framework of the Trump administration's deal of the century, the sense of failure in Ramallah will also deepen. Under these circumstances, it will be hard for the PLO to continue to serve as "the sole representative of the Palestinian people," and the Palestinian Authority, as an internal Palestinian government, will be weakened further. The undermining of the Palestinian arena's stability and the increased tension between the camps will pose a security challenge for Israel that it has not faced in recent years. While Israel may well determine the result of the intra-Palestinian struggle in the West Bank in favor of the national camp/Fatah/the PLO, this would involve severely undermining the legitimacy and weakening this camp, and it is highly doubtful whether it could then continue with security coordination with Israel in its current format.