

**The Palestinians at a Crossroads – Following the Presentation of the
“Deal of the Century”**

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The deal of the century has confronted the Palestinians at one of the weakest moments in their history. Their ability to unify forces in order to cope with the challenges that the deal poses is limited due to the gaps between the positions of the Palestinian Authority and Hamas and because of the criticism and lack of confidence shown by the public toward the two leaderships. Abu Mazen continues to rely on the support of the international community and has made it clear that he does not intend to abandon the path of nonviolent diplomatic struggle. He expects Hamas to take refuge under the umbrella of the PLO. If these efforts fail and the United States does enable Israel to take unilateral actions, if the Arab states do not stand at his side, and if the European Union and/or the UN do not support the Palestinian position or present plans of their own, Abu Mazen could implement the decisions of the National Council and the Central PLO Committee and disconnect from Israel in practice. Then the succession war in the ranks of Fatah over Abu Mazen's successor would intensify, and Hamas would also likely demand influence over the process. This situation would also increase the danger of chaos in the Palestinian arena. For this reason, Israel must do everything it can to refrain as much as possible from carrying out unilateral annexation steps. It would be better to use the Trump plan as backing for demands and as leverage for discussions, along with striving to launch extensive negotiations with pragmatic states in the region and with the Palestinians in order to formulate agreements upon which to regulate the relationship.

The plan for an Israeli-Palestinian settlement presented by the Trump administration has confronted the Palestinians at one of the most difficult periods in their history. Both leaderships—Abu Mazen in Ramallah and Hamas in the Gaza Strip—have been the target of harsh public criticism in recent years and have suffered from a loss of popularity, as they have failed to achieve their objectives and have not proposed alternatives. While Abu Mazen's negotiations strategy, which rejects violent struggle and was the basis for his election as president in 2005, strengthened the Palestinians' international standing and advanced their membership in various international forums, it did not manage to maintain the diplomatic momentum and the infrastructural

development nor did it advance a permanent settlement with Israel and progress toward political independence. Hamas, for its part, also failed in its efforts to further the liberation of “the land of Palestine” via armed resistance, and currently, given the infrastructural and humanitarian crisis in Gaza, it has been compelled to redefine the nature of the conflict with Israel to its activists and to the Palestinian public.

In the middle is the public, which is apathetic and not in a hurry to answer the calls of the two leaderships and to take part in mass protest activities that they have organized. Hamas recently had to stop the marches along Gaza’s border fence due to the many people injured and killed, as well as public exhaustion, and it is even quick to disperse demonstrations that are not coordinated with it. Until the publication of the Trump plan, the Palestinian Authority also made it difficult to carry out protests that were not coordinated with it, and now it is having trouble recruiting the masses to protest the plan. The rise in the number of expressions of violence and attempted terrorist attacks that occurred in the first few days after the publication of the plan resulted mainly from friction with IDF forces and does not necessarily reflect answering Abu Mazen’s call to go out and protest. The PA has not succeeded in instilling in the general public the sense of a real threat to the future of the national project. Meanwhile, the public’s consistent demand of both leaderships, which is expressed in public opinion polls and in social media, is for unity and reconciliation. The general sense is that the split weakens and paralyzes, leaves the Palestinian nation without a path, and imposes on it a haphazard way of life under continued siege and occupation.

After the publication of the Trump plan, this call to go out and protest was also heard from all the organizations that oppose the leadership in Ramallah, including Hamas, the Islamic Jihad, the Popular and Democratic Fronts, and others. The different factions are calling to urgently convene a meeting in which a “national rescue” plan will be outlined. Fatah and Abu Mazen have related positively to this call, albeit without a sense of urgency. Immediately after the Trump plan was issued, Abu Mazen said that he spoke with Ismail Haniyeh, chairman of Hamas, emphasized the severity and the gravity of the situation, and called on all of the organizations to take cover under the umbrella of the PLO in order to effectively cope with the challenges that the plan poses. Two senior Fatah officials, Ruhi Fattuh, originally from Rafah, and Ismail Jaber, former commander of the security forces in the West Bank, were sent to Gaza instead of a delegation that was supposed to represent all the PLO’s factions, but they did not achieve closer relations between the organizations. In a speech at the Security Council on February 11, Abu Mazen repeated his adherence to international decisions regarding the conflict, to negotiations, and to fighting terrorism and all forms of violence. However, he proudly noted the protest (mass protest, according to him), that took place in Ramallah at the time of the speech.

The Israeli-Palestinian security coordination is expected to be a central obstacle to Palestinian reconciliation, including joint activity against the Trump plan. According to reports from Ramallah (some of them contradictory), after a meeting with the head of the CIA on January 30 and after Abu Mazen's appearance before the heads of the Palestinian security forces on February 3, it seemed that the continued security coordination was contingent upon not implementing the plan. However, Abu Mazen's statements at the Security Council put an end to the uncertainty: he made clear that the Palestinians will continue to fight terrorism and refrain from violence regardless of what happens. In addition, Abu Mazen softened his stance toward President Trump, by saying that the plan is not his handiwork but rather the result of bad advice that he received. The Islamic Jihad interpreted this as closing the door on the possibility of reconciliation. Muhammad Al-Hindi, a senior Islamic Jihad official, said that if Abu Mazen continues "to wander around in this maze [security cooperation and fighting terrorism], [he] will lead us to a dead end." Hamas also believes that these statements are incompatible with Palestinian interests and wonders why Abu Mazen has not ordered more practical steps. Abu Mazen, for his part, in a speech at a meeting of Arab foreign ministers on February 1, claimed that the Palestinians (PLO) are signatories to eighty-three anti-terror agreements with states—including the United States—and with international bodies, and that ending the security coordination contradicts these commitments.

Still, some in Abu Mazen's camp believe that his response is too soft and that the speeches and decisions made so far are not enough; rather, it is necessary to chart a path for the public, to enlist it, and to make it clear that the reality has changed and that the Palestinian side will not leave the Trump plan unanswered. Fares Qaddura, a senior Fatah official who is not close to Abu Mazen, believes that quiet civil disobedience should be carried out, without weapons and without throwing stones. He proposes that the masses should sit in the middle of central intersections and stop day-to-day life, which would force Israel to use violence and thus draw international attention. Mohammed Dahlan, from the reformist stream within Fatah and Abu Mazen's rival, has called on him from his residence in the United Arab Emirates to declare a Palestinian State within the 1967 borders with Jerusalem as its capital, to cancel the 1994 mutual recognition agreement with Israel, and to end the security coordination. Demands from speakers outside of the Fatah camp go even further of returning to the era before the Oslo Accords, including withdrawing from the PLO's commitments according to the accords. From their perspective, actions in this direction would remove all obstacles preventing inter-organizational reconciliation in the Palestinian arena.

But at present, such calls have not prompted mass protest that would cause an international uproar. Furthermore, the possibility of inter-organizational reconciliation, in

which Fatah and Hamas would wage a coordinated struggle, does not appear more concrete than in the past. And without reconciliation, it is doubtful that the public will heed the leaderships' calls to take part in mass protest. The Arab media has reported that the Arab states publicly support the Palestinian position but on the condition that the security coordination does not end. It should also be remembered that Abu Mazen himself—like other Arab leaders—is suspicious of any political Islam organization, such as Hamas. In his view, ties with Hamas is tantamount to a connection between religion and nationalism, which could make it much more difficult to make any national decision at hand.

In this constrained reality, the Palestinians seemingly have no choice but to return to old forms of struggle and to try to adapt them to the current local, inter-Arab and international reality. In the past, after exhausting the use of firearms, the Palestinians extensively used the masses in attempts to promote civil disobedience, create inter-organizational partnerships, and cause friction with Israel with the aim of gaining attention.

The current reality is more complex. Thus, despite feelings of rage and frustration, caution will continue to dictate the response in the Abu Mazen era. This could be characterized by several aspects:

- **An effort to enlist regional and international support** that is as broad as possible, in order to make it clear to the American administration that the international community rejects the plan. The European Union's statement, which warns against unilateral steps by Israel and the possibility that it will present an alternative plan to Trump's plan, strengthens Abu Mazen in pursuing this path.
- **Waiting for the establishment of a new government in Israel** in order to understand its character. The heads of the Blue and White list, despite their public support for the Trump plan, often talk about negotiations as a way of getting the Israeli-Palestinian dialogue out of its dead end. In the Security Council discussion in which Abu Mazen spoke, the US ambassador to the UN also called upon Israel and the Palestinians to renew direct negotiations, clarifying that the Trump plan is the beginning of the process and not the end.
- **Treating Israeli annexation** of the territories in the West Bank as a deal-breaker such that if it is carried out, the Palestinian Authority will fulfill its threat to cut off relations and security coordination.
- **Striving to unify forces** not necessarily in reconciliation but rather in formulating a unified and agreed-upon response to the plan. The concern in Ramallah is of destruction that would result from the Israeli response, if Hamas escalates its struggle against it, while Hamas's concern is of a defeatist, futile response.

- **Mass protests** as far as possible without the use of weapons, but by causing friction with the IDF and settlers, in order to attract international and media attention.

If the United States permits Israel to annex territories in the West Bank and the Arab states do not strongly oppose it, and if the European Union, for its part, stands on the sidelines and does not present a plan of its own and if the diplomatic horizon seems blocked, then Abu Mazen could order the implementation of decisions by the National Council and the Central Committee of the PLO. This would mean disconnecting from Israel, dismantling the Palestinian Authority, and returning authority for national decisions to the PLO itself. If this happens, the PLO would operate from the Ramallah region or from outside of the West Bank so that the movement of its people is not restricted.

The danger of internal chaos in this case would intensify, the succession war within Fatah could also move into high gear, and Hamas, for its part, would likely seek to influence determining the leadership that replaces Abu Mazen. We cannot rule out the possibility that in such a situation, mass protests—like those of the First Intifada and the Arab Spring—would become the main form of struggle.

For these reasons, Israel must refrain as much as possible from carrying out unilateral annexation steps. It would be better to use the Trump plan as backing for demands and as leverage for discussions, along with striving to launch extensive negotiations with pragmatic states in the region and with the Palestinians in order to formulate agreements upon which to regulate the relationship.