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**A Palestinian Moment of Truth, in Light of Normalization between  
Israel and the UAE**

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**The announcement by President Donald Trump regarding normalization of relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates has heightened the Palestinians' distress and forced them to consider their future. A conference in Ramallah and Beirut on September 3, 2020, with the participation of all the Palestinian factions, reflected their sense of the seriousness of the current challenge. In the closing statement, all agreed on the need to fight the American-Israeli plot by means of "popular resistance," although at the conference itself Hamas and Islamic Jihad leaders voiced their traditional preference for armed resistance, non-recognition of Israel, and a refusal to compromise with it. Highly prominent was the attempt to play down the disputes between the factions and to convey a sense of rapprochement (if not exactly unity) between Fatah and Hamas.**

On September 3, 2020 a video conference was held simultaneously in Ramallah and Beirut, with the participation of Palestinian Authority Chairman Abu Mazen and all the Palestinian factions. The purpose of the conference, which was led jointly by Fatah and Hamas, was to examine ways to confront the serious dilemma posed by President Donald Trump's announcement of normalization of relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, and the rapid and widely reported implementation of the agreement, including visits, signing of agreements, and the date for the normalization ceremony. The conference intended to convey to the Palestinian public the extent of the challenge, and to create an impression of unity in order to meet the challenge. It was the first conference attended by all the Palestinian factions – members of the PLO and those who are not members – without Arab mediation. In Beirut were Ismail Haniyeh, the chairman of the Political Bureau of Hamas; Ziad Nahalla, the general secretary of Islamic Jihad; and all the heads of other factions who are barred from Palestinian Authority areas. The Fatah representatives were in Ramallah, including Abu Mazen, and representatives of other factions who are permitted to enter Ramallah. Also attending was Mohammad Barakeh, a former member of the Israeli Knesset. The conference was defined by all the speakers as historic, due to what was described as a significant political turning point on the Palestinian issue, and all participants called for unity and reconciliation.

The underlying theme of the conference was the sweeping rejection of the normalization between Israel and the UAE, and anger at the UAE for breaking the Arab consensus and apparently emptying the Arab Peace Initiative of any meaning. Speakers at the conference defined the move as a stab in the back, and in particular expressed anger at the UAE claim that the move was made in return for Israel's renunciation of its intention to annex areas in the West Bank. Moreover, most believed that the annexation plan has not been abandoned, but simply postponed, as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has declared many times, even after the normalization process was announced. They also expressed concern over the precedent set by the UAE, which could be followed by other Arab states ostensibly acting in the name of the Palestinians. In this way the Palestinians could lose their independence of decision – a fundamental principle for the PLO. This issue took center stage at the conference and also in the final statement.

At the conference itself, notwithstanding the evident gaps between Fatah and Hamas, there was shared recognition by these two large organizations of the acuteness of the situation, and the need to relay to the Palestinian public, which has recently been so critical of them, a joint message. Thus both Abu Mazen and Haniyeh underscored that the conference arose from shared thinking. Haniyeh declared that “we are now in a serious dialogue with Fatah,” and while he stressed his organization's traditional hard line, he also announced that he accepted Abu Mazen's proposal to set up a joint leadership for non-violent popular resistance. This was likewise stated in the conference's concluding statement. The statement included de facto recognition of Abu Mazen as the source of authority for the actions of any committees set up following the conference – notwithstanding the extensive criticism of the PA leader and his waning status in the eyes of the public. The day after the conference, in an interview on Ramallah's Palestine channel, Haniyeh praised Abu Mazen as well as the visit to the Gaza Strip by the Health Ministry delegation, led by the Minister of Health Mai Kilah, to examine the situation following the rise in coronavirus cases.

Even Islamic Jihad, which was quick to issue its reservations over the concluding statement, wanted to moderate its criticism. Mohammed al-Hindi, a senior member of the organization, said: “The Palestinian Authority is completely convinced of the failure of the negotiations route” – which in his assessment is evidence that the conference succeeded. He added that his organization would work for the success of the new committees. The Islamic Jihad position regarding the '67 lines issue is well known, he said, and the organization called for the liberation of all of Palestine, but at the present time, this position harms the conference's chances of success. Therefore “we must assume responsibility at this time, when the occupation is trying to eliminate the Palestinian problem.”

However, the final statement worried some elements in the resistance organizations, who claim that the message regarding continuation of the struggle against Israel was too

restrained. The criticism focused on the announcement of popular resistance without an armed struggle; the end of occupation and a Palestinian state within the '67 lines were presented in the statement as a strategic objective – and not as a stage in the liberation of Palestine as a whole. In other words, the undertakings of the PLO as formulated in the Oslo agreements remain in force; the statement contains no call to withdraw from the recognition of Israel, or a definition of practical steps for reconciliation between the organizations, such as elections and renewal of the leadership. All these, in the opinion of critics from the resistance organizations, show that there is no real change and no new strategy.

Criticism was sounded in a statement published by the resistance organizations in the Gaza Strip on September 6, in which they welcomed the Beirut-Ramallah meeting, but declared that they expected practical moves on the ground, that is, a united national plan to release them from the bonds of Oslo and embrace resistance in all its forms. They added a demand for the PLO to withdraw from its recognition of Israel and for the Palestinian Authority to cancel its sanctions against the Gaza Strip. For them, normalization between Israel and the UAE does not reflect the will of the Arab people, and therefore popular Arab Islamic action is required to condemn those who support normalization with Israel, including some religious leaders – “court sheikhs” – who have sanctioned the development with religious rulings.

At the same time, the joint Fatah and Hamas announcement at the end of the conference reflected the corner in which the Palestinians find themselves, particularly since the Trump administration began to promote its framework for Israeli-Palestinian peace. On the one hand, the political process outlined in the Oslo Accords has come to an end. On the other hand, the armed resistance led by Hamas and the other opposition organizations that reject Fatah policy has not brought any progress toward Palestinian independence. In other words, the Trump plan led the Palestinians down a blind alley, leaving only scorched earth. As the PLO sees it, the Oslo process was supposed to end with an independent state. As Hamas sees it, the process was a fact that could not be changed. The possibility of such a one-sided, pro-Israel, and unpredictable US administration, one that would change the rules of the game accepted by previous administrations, never occurred to anyone.

Against this background, the tension between the organizations increased, internal criticism of the Palestinian Authority grew fiercer, tension rose between the PA and the Arab states that have ties with the Trump administration and are subject to US pressure, and relations between the PA and Israel have been severely damaged. The result is further weakening of the Palestinian Authority, both internally and regionally – a trend that increases the danger of its collapse.

With their distress and anger at the UAE (which has softened slightly in recent days), once again it is hard for the Palestinians to see that the cup is half full. They do not give proper practical importance to the fact that postponement of annexation was in fact imposed on the Israeli government, and that their opposition to annexation played an important role in the pressure applied to it. They ignore the fact that the intention to annex aroused opposition even among supporters of Prime Minister Netanyahu, and the understanding that has recently dawned on the US leadership that Israel's main interest in the framework presented by the Trump administration lay in the annexation of parts of the West Bank, rather than in the plan itself – including the objective of a Palestinian state. The fact that Arab states that have signed peace agreements with Israel have more influence on it than the others did not appear among their set of considerations – nor the fact that the UAE's joining this group could strengthen its leverage, and to the Palestinians' advantage.

The conference's final statement, therefore, reflects an attempt to pick up the pieces, grow stronger, and bridge between Fatah and Hamas. However, it is not clear whether these goals will be realized, particularly in view of the opposition to the agreements from the ranks of the organizations, although foundations were laid in May 2017 with the publication of the new Hamas manifesto: Hamas accepts the principle of a Palestinian state in the '67 lines, but only because it is dictated by the Palestinian consensus, and in any event without recognizing Israel. In addition, Hamas agreed to be subordinate to an agreed leadership of all the organizations, which would lead the opposition to Israel and determine the nature of the struggle – violent or non-violent.

Israel should not rest on the laurels of normalization with the UAE and Bahrain, but recognize that it is not possible to nullify the Palestinian issue and Palestinian views. It would do well to seek the help of Egypt and Jordan, with which it has peace agreements, in order to show the Palestinians the potential opportunities for them offered by normalization, and thereby motivate them to rejoin the political process. At the same time, the Palestinians must internalize the lesson of normalization, namely, that Arab states will not necessarily wait for them indefinitely to reach agreement with Israel, and therefore, they should seek a way to restart the political process with Israel.