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**The Mladenov Approach: The UN as Mediator and Agent of
Compromise**

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After starting as the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process in February 2015, Nickolay Mladenov influenced the Israeli-Palestinian arena a great deal, working diligently to advance understandings and improve the reality on the ground, including in an effort to forge an arrangement between Israel and the Gaza Strip. Mladenov's balanced and pragmatic approach, which holds that conditions must be built from the bottom up to shape the reality of two states for two peoples, is appropriate in the current circumstances for managing the conflict in the Israeli-Palestinian arena, until the parties recognize the need to make weighty decisions that allow for an extensive political arrangement. Cooperation between Israel and Mladenov's successor, based on his contributions and the patterns of action he instilled, will enable the continuation of a beneficial relationship and recognition of the need to preserve this important channel of communication.

For nearly six years, Nickolay Mladenov served as the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, after serving as Foreign Minister and Defense Minister in Bulgaria and the UN envoy to Iraq. After taking office as coordinator in February 2015, Mladenov greatly influenced the Israeli-Palestinian arena and worked diligently to advance understandings and improve the reality on the ground, even when a political arrangement could not be reached. This approach is reflected in the measures taken in the Gaza Strip, which have dramatically reduced the threshold of violence and defined an equation – relief and development in exchange for an end to terrorism. Mladenov illustrated the UN's ability to act as a mediator and prevent the deterioration of crises into large-scale violent clashes, as has often been the case when rogue elements operating in the Gaza Strip or Hamas tried to escalate. He understood the motives of the organizations, analyzed the interests of the parties, and identified ways to calm the situation.

Mladenov, who left his post at the end of December, will be replaced by Tor Wennesland, who has a deep knowledge of the Israeli-Palestinian arena: he served as Tony Blair's adviser in his role as Quartet envoy for Middle East affairs; head representative for Palestinian Authority affairs on behalf of the Norwegian Embassy; and

as Norway's envoy to the Middle East. He is considered an experienced and fair diplomat, although there are concerns that his positions are less pro-Israel than those of his predecessor. His close ties with both senior Israeli officials and Hamas stand to help him promote an arrangement between the parties.

Mladenov took office about six months after Operation Protective Edge, and for the first two years with the help of the United Nations Gaza Rehabilitation Mechanism (GRM), worked mainly on restoring infrastructure and dealing with damage caused during the fighting. GRM focused on supervising raw materials brought into the Strip and ensuring, in close coordination with Israel and the Palestinian Authority, that they would be used for reconstruction and not for Hamas buildup. Within three years almost all the infrastructure and public buildings destroyed in the Strip during the fighting (hospitals, schools, water and electricity infrastructure) were repaired and most of the damaged houses were restored.

However, in 2017, after about two years of security stability and relative recovery, Gaza experienced a sharp economic and humanitarian deterioration following reduced payments by the Palestinian Authority for electricity, and non-payment of salaries in the public sector. Mladenov enlisted to support the Egyptian mediation effort for intra-Palestinian reconciliation, which led to the Cairo Agreement in October 2017. According to the agreement, civilian control of Gaza, including the crossings to and from the Strip, was to be handed over to a Palestinian Authority-run unity government with the participation of Hamas and Fatah. By March 2018, it was clear that the agreement was not viable, and internal criticism of Hamas for its failed administration in the Gaza Strip, against the background of the economic and humanitarian crisis, intensified to the point of violent protests.

On March 30, 2018, Land Day, demonstrations broke out along the border fence between Israel and the Gaza Strip, under the banner "The Great March of Return." Hamas saw this as an opportunity to divert the criticism and direct public anger toward Israel. The violent demonstrations along the fence lasted for about a year and a half on a weekly basis and claimed the lives of over 200 Palestinians in incidents with the IDF. The Hamas leadership turned to the UN and clarified that it was ready to calm the situation in exchange for "lifting the siege on Gaza." Mladenov used this as an opportunity to link the easing of the closure and development of infrastructure in the Gaza Strip to the cessation of violence by Hamas and the achievement of security calm, and began to mediate between the parties.

After a particularly violent day – on May 14, 2018, the inauguration of the US embassy in Jerusalem and the eve of Nakba Day – the mediation efforts led by the UN and Egypt

between Israel and Hamas gained momentum. These efforts created a permanent channel for mediation between Israel and Hamas and created an ongoing framework for whenever there was a violent flare-up, which in many cases was ignited by rogue elements that objected to Hamas's implementing understandings with Israel. In September 2018, Mladenov led the approval of an assistance package for Gaza in the International Donor Group for Palestine (AHLC) and also received international backing from the UN to bring Qatari-funded fuel to the Gaza Strip power plant, thus significantly expanding power supply in the region. As part of the agreement, the UN has created more than 30,000 jobs in Gaza (Cash for Work), and progress has also been made in large water and energy infrastructure projects. The suitcases of dollars that arrive in the Gaza Strip every few months via the emissary from Qatar, mediated by the UN and approved by Israel only under conditions of security calm, help Hamas maintain calm by making payments to the needy and to those wounded in the Marches of Return.

Arrangement efforts demonstrated the UN's ability to mediate understandings even in conditions of fierce hostility, while taking into account the interests of both sides and bridging gaps between them. As Mladenov described in a lecture in June 2020 at the Bulgarian Institute of Diplomacy, the post he filled has tools that other countries or organizations do not have when it comes to preventive diplomacy: (1) the ability to talk to all parties (especially significant in an arena where there is a rift between many of the relevant actors – Hamas and Israel, Egypt and Qatar; the Palestinian Authority and the United States); (2) rapid mobilization of economic backing from the international community; (3) permanent presence on the ground – UN agencies deployed in the Gaza Strip – enabling vigorous and ongoing mediation and rapid implementation of projects.

Mladenov's influence was also evident in the West Bank, when volatile and tense periods (e.g., the 2015-2016 terror wave that included car-rammings and stabbings, the crisis that developed in 2017 after Israel placed magnetometers at the entrance to the Temple Mount) passed without an eruption of widespread violence.

A necessary condition for Mladenov's successful use of this toolbox was the acquisition of trust by the three sides – the Palestinian Authority, Hamas, and Israel. Israel in particular was required to overcome its underlying suspicion of the UN and its skepticism that UN representatives would take its interests into account. Indeed, in this period Israel faced prominent attacks in the UN arena (for example, the UNESCO decision on Jerusalem, which denied the Jewish connection to the Temple Mount and the Western Wall, and denied Israeli sovereignty over the city; publication of a blacklist of 112 businesses operating in Israeli settlements in the West Bank). Against this problematic background, Mladenov earned the respect and cooperation of the Israeli political and security establishment.

Indeed, Mladenov was perceived as a balanced voice, even in the face of the complex reality within which he operated. Although he consistently and sharply criticized the actions of Israel, especially with regard to settlement expansion, he also criticized actions on the Palestinian side, in particular terrorism and incitement, and knew how to hold it accountable when asked (for example, his criticism of the PA's refusal to accept tax money, and the halt in funding for electricity in Gaza). He appears to have been the international body that spoke most consistently and decisively against Hamas's conduct regarding Israeli prisoners and missing persons in the Gaza Strip. Mladenov's pragmatism was also reflected in the 2016 Quartet report, which he co-drafted. Although the report demanded that Israel stop building in the settlements, it also demanded that the Palestinian Authority condemn terrorist attacks, stop incitement against Israel, and increase counter-terrorism efforts. The report is somewhat forgotten in light of UN Security Council Resolution 2334 on the illegality of settlements under international law and the United States abstention (at the end of President Obama's term), but it presented a more realistic plan than previous conflict resolution plans, while focusing on steps that change reality and awareness on the ground and prepare for negotiations.

Mladenov stood out in the diplomatic arena for his support of the two-state solution as a "two states for two peoples" solution. He reiterated that the recognition of the historical and religious connection of the Jewish people and the Palestinian people to the land and their national aspirations is the basis for any future solution. He publicly opposed claims that Israel was a "colonial project" and declared that the denial of its right to exist was a modern form of antisemitism. His ability to understand the needs of both parties and at the same time demand responsibility from them bought him the status of a fair mediator.

Mladenov's pragmatic approach, which states that the conditions for a two-state reality must be built for two peoples from the bottom up, with determined and ongoing efforts, is appropriate for managing the conflict in the Israeli-Palestinian arena, until both sides recognize the need to make weighty decisions that will allow for an extensive political arrangement. Cooperation between Israel and Mladenov's successor, based on the patterns of action he designed and instilled, will make it possible to preserve the mediation channel that he established and proved effective.