

Israel and the Palestinians: Approaching an Age that Defies Negotiations?

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The PLO as an organization and its leader Abu Mazen essentially lost their status as the sole representatives of the Palestinian people once Abu Mazen decided to cancel the elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council. The Palestinian Authority suffers from a loss of relevance, and Abu Mazen personally is the target of harsh criticism from many members of Fatah, who are eager for his departure. In the meantime, since 2009 there has been ongoing Israeli pressure to remove the Palestinian issue from the regional and international agenda. The Trump administration's "deal of the century" also hit the Palestinian Authority and Abu Mazen in a way that makes it hard for them to restore their status. Hamas has gained from this situation: its position as a viable alternative has strengthened in public opinion, and consequently, it is doubtful whether Abu Mazen or his successors in the nationalist camp will be able to return to the political process in its familiar format. The key to change is in the hands of the United States, the international community, and Israel, who could revive the dying process and return Abu Mazen or his replacement to their lost legitimacy.

The crisis affecting the Palestinian national movement in recent years has reached unprecedented heights, with stark evidence over the past year at the ideological, leadership, and organizational levels. Abu Mazen, chairman of the PLO and chairman of the Palestinian Authority since 2005, is suffering from a loss of legitimacy and relevance. Recent public opinion polls indicate that over 75 percent of the Palestinians are eager for him to exit the stage. The criticism crosses lines and camps and penetrates deep into Fatah, which he heads. Many members believe that he is largely to blame for the rifts in the movement, its weakness, and the unraveling ties to the younger generation. The numerous revelations about corruption in the movement have also sparked widespread public anger.

The political dilemma currently facing the Palestinians concerns the right way to promote their national objectives, in view of the failure of the Oslo process; should they rely on the armed resistance tactics of Hamas and Islamic Jihad in order to achieve an independent state, or rather wait for the emergence of one state from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean

Sea, which many believe will eventually occur. Experience shows that the armed struggle was tried and did not bring the desired result. Even Hamas, which cloaks itself in the glory of the resistance movement that “imposes” its will on Israel, has not managed to advance the Palestinian issue during its fourteen years of rule in the Gaza Strip, and has in fact brought great destruction to the Strip and consequently been the object of strong public anger. In recent years Hamas has sought reconciliation with Fatah, recognizing that one faction cannot lead the Palestinians to political independence. Rapprochement between the organizations will involve compromises; Hamas has already stated that it is ready for these compromises, but that is not enough to persuade Abu Mazen.

Not all of Abu Mazen’s sixteen years of rule can be dismissed as a failure. Part of the time he was engaged in genuine talks, based on mutual trust, with then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, arousing great hopes in his people, and – in spite of rejecting Olmert’s proposals – continued to tighten security coordination to prevent violence. At the same time, with then-Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, he constructed an institutional and economic infrastructure for the future state, building a middle class that benefited from employment and economic security and continues to contribute to security stability on the West Bank. For these actions, in 2012 the Palestinian Authority was recognized by the World Bank as competent to establish and lead an independent state.

Since 2009 and the rise of right-wing governments in Israel, however, Abu Mazen has faced Israeli efforts to erase the Palestinian issue from the local and international agenda. Abu Mazen’s failure to respond to Prime Minister Olmert’s far-reaching proposals was interpreted as a Palestinian rejection of a peace settlement. The Israeli governments did not hide their lack of interest in the political process, decried Abu Mazen, and the conditions they set for renewal of talks aroused distrust and were refused by the Palestinians. The efforts of then-US Secretary of State John Kerry to hold another round of talks in 2013-2014 were destined to fail in view of the crisis of trust between the parties, the Palestinians’ rejection of the offers that Kerry placed on the table, and the tension between the White House

and then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The “deal of the century,” put together by the Trump administration, essentially adopted the positions of the Israeli right and sought to impose a settlement framework on the Palestinians that they clearly would not accept. The administration was angry with the Palestinians for their rejection and took punitive measures – most American aid was cut, and the administration even pressed Arab states to do the same. Abu Mazen was unable to recover from the shock of this blow from the United States, which the Palestinians had always seen as an honest broker in spite of its well-known tendency to support Israel.

In view of the Palestinian Authority's isolation, Abu Mazen was forced to make moves toward Hamas and the other opposition factions. However, *once* he understood that he could lose the elections to the Legislative Council that he himself initiated, he decided to cancel them, claiming that Israel was not allowing elections to take place in Jerusalem. The cancellation of the elections that were supposed to mark the high point of the process of rapprochement between the Palestinian factions exacerbated the rift, deepened the split in the Fatah ranks, and struck a fatal blow to his personal standing. Hamas, convinced that cancellation of the elections had deprived it of a certain victory, had already ignited provocations around the al-Aqsa mosque and Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood in Jerusalem in order to spur conflict with Israel. Operation Guardian of the Walls in May 2021 brought Hamas broad support and cast a heavy shadow over Abu Mazen and Fatah. The PLO, the Palestinian umbrella organization, effectively lost its status as the sole representative of the Palestinian people. On the other hand, and notwithstanding many reservations, Hamas was increasingly seen by the public as an alternative. The repeated call by Hamas since 2017 for national reconciliation creates trust among the public and depicts Abu Mazen as the sole obstacle to this objective.

In these circumstances, it is doubtful whether Fatah alone can still lead the PLO. It must deal with the demands of Hamas and other opposition groups to be part of the official leadership of the Palestinian people, and compromise with them. As of now, Abu Mazen is barring the way and

hinging any move in this direction on affirmation of the commitments that the PLO has assumed, and on an end to the armed struggle, with all weapons subject to one authority. However, it is very doubtful whether among his possible successors in Fatah there is anybody who will have the legitimacy to make such a demand. In the eyes of Hamas and the other opposition groups, Abu Mazen enjoys the status of a legitimate president, who was elected on the basis of the policies he presented in the elections and has pursued ever since. Consequently, he can declare occasionally that the security coordination is sacred and that international decisions are the basis for all political negotiations. But after the cancellation of the elections, all are eager for his departure, and after that, many will demand a reorganization of the Palestinian leadership, whose demands will underscore the need to reduce the asymmetry between the Palestinians and Israel.

Therefore, it is not at all certain that it will be possible to continue speaking in terms of an arrangement, or whether the calls to return to talks, mainly from Abu Mazen's associates and from elements in the regional system, particularly Jordan, will still be relevant. The desire to reduce the asymmetry between the Palestinians and Israel will involve a more forceful stand against Israel in order to change the starting terms for talks. This is due to the growing recognition of the failure of Abu Mazen's ostensibly conciliatory approach. This could translate into increased friction between IDF soldiers and Palestinians in the West Bank, based on the Gaza pattern, namely close physical friction without firearms, to create heavy international pressure on Israel.

Is it still possible to deflect the Palestinian system from the direction it has taken, or is this an irreversible process? The actions of the Trump administration showed that too much pressure on the Palestinians ultimately brings the warring camps closer to each other. They also showed that American friendliness to Israel and support for its positions weaken the Palestinian side, its ability to perform its role in security coordination, and its viability as a possible partner for political negotiations.

In the competition with Hamas, Fatah relies on a coalition of all the elements that promoted the Oslo process and since then have worked to preserve it. They include the United States and many others in the international community, who recognized the Palestinian Authority and the PLO in important international forums and have given the Palestinians a great deal of aid, and the moderate Arab states, who backed the political process led by the US. The PLO, unlike Hamas, is part of this camp. The aid given to the Palestinian Authority plays an important role in assuring its stability and the security stability in the West Bank. Israel also plays a part in this. The very existence of dialogue, if it is constructive and sincere, gives the Palestinian Authority and its leader legitimacy, proof of the rightness of their path in the face of political rivals, and plants hope in the Palestinian public.

Therefore, the move that is required to prevent the loss of an arrangement option is to recruit all the involved elements to jumpstart a process that presents a clear political horizon, clarifies that the Palestinian issue is not erased from the agenda, and expresses trust in any Palestinian national leadership that is committed to the agreements signed with Israel and the PLO's commitments. Until then, it would be advisable for Israel not to object to renewal of ties between the PLO and the United States, including renewal of the aid to the Palestinian Authority, reopening the PLO embassy in Washington, and opening the consulate that was closed in East Jerusalem in a location agreed with Israel, provided that it is clear that the future of East Jerusalem will be determined in talks. Israel for its part must clarify that it has no interest in the collapse of the Palestinian Authority, that it values the security cooperation with the PA, and that it is interested in dialogue that will extend this cooperation to other areas.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen