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## **Abu Mazen's Opposition to Recognition of Israel as a Jewish State: Strategic Implications**

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While in 1993 Israel recognized the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people, Abu Mazen does not recognize Israel as a Jewish state. This rejection clashes with the Israeli position, including as defined in Israel's Declaration of Independence. Many years after the signing of the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian position has become clear to the Israeli public, and it is doubtful whether Oslo agreement would have been signed had the Palestinians declared their objections back then. Their position has profound significance for the negotiations on a permanent settlement, because in effect it means Palestinian advocacy of a two-state solution: an independent Palestinian state next to Israel as a bi-national (Jewish-Palestinian) state within the Green Line, in contrast to a solution of two states for two peoples, as advocated by Israel.

"We cannot recognize a Jewish state," Abu Mazen said in an interview with the Egyptian newspaper *Akhbar al-Yawm* on November 30, 2014 (Memri, December 5, 2014):

We will stand against this enterprise, not out of obstinacy, but because it contradicts our interests. The first to suffer from this law will be 1.5 million Arabs who would be [sic] no longer belong to Israel, due to their religion...There is another reason...[Israel] will not allow the return of refugees. There are six million refugees who wish to return, and by the way, I am one of them. We need to find creative solutions because we cannot close the door to those who wish to return. Israel aspires to a Jewish state, and ISIS aspires to an Islamic state, and here we, suspended between Jewish extremism and Islamic extremism. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi will have an excuse to establish an Islamic state after the Jewish state law is approved.

Elsewhere in the interview, Abu Mazen stated:

Netanyahu once told me that it was an "idea from hell," from his perspective, for him to give me the Triangle [within the Green Line – S.E.] and everything in it. [The Triangle] was occupied in 1949 and at that time it had 38,000 residents. Today, it probably has about 400,000 residents. I said: I will not take anyone.

Forget it, because honestly, I will not allow, or force, any Arab to relinquish his Israeli citizenship... As far as I'm concerned, this issue is sacred. For example, in the fourth round of the release of our Palestinian prisoners, 15 of the 30 are 1948 Arabs [Israeli Arabs]. They told me: Take them to the West Bank, and they will relinquish their citizenship. I told them: This is impossible: They should return to their homes and retain their citizenship.

This position matches what Abu Mazen said in 2009 in a closed conversation with the Palestinian support team in the negotiations headed by Saeb Erekat (the protocol was leaked and published in *The Guardian* in January 2011). After Abu Mazen said that the Palestinians in Jordan, Lebanon, and elsewhere would be able to obtain citizenship in the future Palestinian state, one of the team members, an Israeli Palestinian from Nazareth, asked, "Will I be granted Palestinian citizenship in the future state?" Abu Mazen answered,

The answer, strategically, is no. You should stay where you, protect your rights are [sic] and preserve your community. You don't need a passport to prove that you are a Palestinian. In 1948 Palestinians in Israel were 138,000 and now above a million. That homeland is your homeland. You must remain there and this does not detract whatsoever from the fact that you are Arabs and Palestinians...Raise two banners. Equality and an independent state for your brothers in the occupied territory.

No mention was made of an Israeli banner or flag.

In this conversation, Abu Mazen admitted that it was illogical to demand that Israel accept all the refugees, or even one million of them – "that would mean the end of Israel." He insisted, however, that any Palestinian would be able to decide whether he wanted to return to Israel, or to accept monetary compensation. Abu Mazen himself had announced that he would remain in the Palestinian state, and would not return to his hometown of Safed, although his son (Yasir Abbas) and his grandson have declared their intention to "return to Safed, in Palestine."

In the November 2014 interview with *Akhbar al-Yawm*, Abu Mazen proposed an interim arrangement, which in his view includes the end of the occupation and the establishment of a Palestinian state (he opposes an interim arrangement that is not withdrawal to the 1967 borders). Addressing Netanyahu rhetorically, he said,

I panhandle in order to pay clerks, and the health and education sectors, while the occupier has it all. I cannot continue like this. Take all this authority, and if you don't, let us talk of the peace that the world has approved – that is, a border between two countries and Jerusalem as our capital. The other details, such as refugees, security, and more, can be discussed later.

Abu Mazen objects to participation by Palestinian Israelis in an uprising, and in 2009, he stated, "We do not want you to participate in any intifadas." This position matches the reaction to the violence in the Israeli-Arab theater in recent weeks. In October 2015, Abu Mazen called for moderating the responses of Arab citizens of Israel, and appealed to Knesset members from the Joint List, who were in touch with him directly, not to go to the Temple Mount at this time. This call differed from the calls to struggle against Israel, which were delivered to all Palestinians. For example, in November 2014, a Fatah conference in Ramallah headed by Abu Mazen was entitled, "The Homeland Shahids Meeting, the Shahids of Jerusalem, the Shahids of al-Aqsa." On this occasion, Abu Mazen called on everyone to sacrifice himself for al-Aqsa, noting that the defense of al-Aqsa was a moral, national, and religious right. In the concluding statement, the council praised the heroic rising of the public in Jerusalem, warning against an attempt to defile al-Aqsa, recommend the allocations of fund to the families of the Shahids, and expressed determination to continue the struggle. On October 14, 2015, Abu Mazen charged that Israel was taking measures "to attack the al-Aqsa mosque – Judaize it and divide it." Israel flatly denies this allegation.

### **Strategic Implications**

Abu Mazen's position reflects the fundamental Palestinian principle, evident since 1947 and even before, that opposes a Jewish state in the Land of Israel with adjustments based on the current situation. This policy can be regarded as evidence of the aim to establish an independent Palestinian state on the basis of the 1967 borders, in which Jews will not reside, next to Israel as a Jewish-Palestinian bi-national state where the Palestinian minority will increase and grow stronger. In other words, there is de facto acceptance of Israel as a country with a Jewish majority for a limited time only. On the eastern side of the Palestinian state will be Jordan, which has had a Palestinian majority for many years. The Palestinians will then be dominant on various levels on both banks of the Jordan River.

Abu Mazen apparently assigns the Israeli Arab-Palestinians, especially in their future numbers, an important role in the design of Israel as a bi-national state, in both demographic and political aspects. He expects to increase their proportion of the Israeli population in several ways, with the common denominator a one-way movement of Palestinians into Israel: exercise of the right of return on a large scale; a Palestinian policy of increasing the number of Israeli identity cards held by Palestinians, including not giving Palestinian passports to Palestinian Israeli citizens who want them; and refusal to accept territory within the Green Line populated by Israeli Palestinian citizens as part of negotiated territorial exchanges. Abu Mazen's current opposition to a violent struggle by Israeli Palestinians is likely caused by fear that such violence will lead to a response by Israel that will affect their status, their ability to promote Palestinian interests in the Israeli political system, and the opportunity to exercise the right of return. From his

perspective, he now needs their political power in Israel (which he is undoubtedly aware of, given his direct connections with Israeli Arab leaders). The power of the Arab Knesset members was illustrated in September 1995, for example, when they tilted the balance in the Knesset in favor of the interim agreement between Israel and the Palestinians (with 61 in favor against 59 opposed – in other words, without a majority of the Jewish Knesset members).

Abu Mazen realizes that the demand for the right of return on a large scale is impractical. At the same time, particularly given his shaky political status, compromise on this position is difficult. He must certainly realize that this position delays renewal and progress in the negotiations on a permanent settlement, and therefore the termination of the occupation and the establishment of a Palestinian state. He has therefore proposed an interim solution, in which a Palestinian state will be established on the basis of the 1967 borders with its capital in East Jerusalem, without Palestinian recognition of a Jewish state, and postponement of the discussion on other material disputes. He likely prefers that an interim arrangement along these lines be imposed on the parties by the international system.

For Israel, his proposal can be seen as an attempt to obtain most of the assets that the Palestinians can obtain in a permanent settlement without such an agreement, without sufficient recognition of Israel, and without an end to the conflict, thereby leaving an opening for additional demands in the future. Some, however, are likely to regard such a proposal as an opening for discussion of a consensual separation, which is preferable to a unilateral withdrawal.

