

BICOM Briefing

# Abbas: in search of a new strategy

Brig. Gen. (res.) Michael Herzog

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## The future of an Israeli-Palestinian peace process under US mediation

The Palestinian Authority (PA) and its President Mahmoud Abbas essentially “checked out” of the US-led peace process after US President Donald Trump’s decision to recognise Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. Abbas used that decision as a convenient excuse. He was afraid of the US peace plan coming his way, felt he would have to reject it – while Israel may have accepted it – and didn’t want to navigate that situation. That’s why he seized Trump’s announcement as an opportunity to say the US is no longer an honest broker and therefore cannot continue to serve as an exclusive mediator, and to turn to the alternative strategy (long preferred by him) of “internationalising the conflict”.

The US administration has been working on a plan for nearly a year. It refers to the current crisis as a “cooling off” period and hopes to let the dust settle and subsequently resume the game of peace-making in the hope that the PA will ultimately be persuaded to return to negotiations. My impression is that they are still bent on Plan A – working on their plan for a comprehensive deal, improving it and ultimately presenting it to the parties. There is an implicit assumption in sticking to Plan A that the Palestinians can be brought back into the process, perhaps with Arab support.

Yet the message from the Palestinians – including in Abbas’s recent speeches and other statements made by the PA’s leadership – is the opposite. Abbas, whose public support among Palestinians has significantly eroded in recent years, is adopting a defiant tone towards the US and the US-led process in order to boost his standing. The PA not only suspended most official political contacts with the US but is also launching its own initiatives – seeking international recognition of Palestinian statehood and additional international sponsors to the peace process. There is also the decision (yet to be implemented) by the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) Central Committee to reconsider relations with, and recognition of, Israel as well as security cooperation. These initiatives could in turn further escalate US-PA tensions.

The mindset of the Palestinian leadership is that they do not want to return to negotiations. They feel that the Arabs have lost much of their leverage over the Palestinian side, as well as their

enthusiasm to actively support the peace process. Jerusalem is sensitive and emotional to the Arab and Muslim world. The Palestinians believe that playing this card correctly – namely waving a “red flag” against what is presented as a US attempt at giving away the “beating heart” of this world – would tie the Arab states’ hands by their own public opinion and block them from pressuring the Palestinians to return to peace talks. While the Arab response to the US recognition of Jerusalem was relatively modest, far below Palestinian expectations, the Palestinians are not wholly wrong in their feeling about the Arab states.

If the US administration ultimately reaches the conclusion that there is no way of getting the Palestinians back into the process, it will have to consider its options, as follows:

- Present the plan to the parties, and either walk away, leaving the plan on the table, or announce that there will be consequences for rejecting it, before walking away. In such a scenario, the administration might punish one side and reward the other. They already gave Israel recognition of Jerusalem and cut funding to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), but there are additional measures that could be taken.
- Simply walk away without putting anything on the table (coupled with the possibility of attributing blame for the failure, with subsequent consequences). This is currently not the administration’s thinking, but it is an option that could be considered.
- Continue to work on their plan but delay its presentation for a significantly extended period of time. In the interim, focus on alternative plans to improve the situation on the ground in the West Bank and Gaza.
- Abandon Plan A for the “ultimate deal” and switch to a Plan B, something more modest such as a partial/interim agreement. Some international actors are urging the US administration to adopt this option; however, the administration is not leaning towards it.

Within the current cooling off period, the US administration is considering certain measures it can take until things become clearer regarding whether the Palestinians can be brought back into the process. One area where there is much

more US focus today than in the past is Gaza, which the administration understands is an explosive issue.

### The relationship between the Arab states and the Palestinian Authority

The Arab reaction to the US decision to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital was rather moderate and not what the Palestinians expected. When Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan convened an Islamic summit in Istanbul to protest the US decision, only two Arab leaders, Jordan's King Abdullah II and Abbas showed up. The other countries sent low level delegates. Most Arab leaders are highly critical of Abbas and Palestinian dysfunctionality, and a number of them have developed close, below the radar relationships with Israel.

Arab states also have their own domestic constraints because Jerusalem is a highly sensitive and emotional issue for many Arabs and Muslims. This is why Arab leaders, while restraining their actual response to Trump's announcement, publicly highlighted the traditional Arab position that East Jerusalem should be the capital of the future Palestinian state. Abbas now realises that rather than these states having leverage over him, he has leverage over them. He is in a position to accuse them of betraying support for Jerusalem, something which will be damaging to them on the "Arab street".

This weakens the hand of those who were hoping that the Arab states would play an effective role in the peace process, especially the US. The Arab leaders are currently telling Abbas not to burn bridges with the US and to not take any extreme measures. At least for now, it doesn't look as if Abbas is listening.

For the major Arab actors (some of whom are divided) to explicitly support the US initiative and pressure Abbas to go along with it, they would have to be acquainted with the US plan. They would have to be able to judge it as not significantly deviating from traditional Arab positions on the sensitive core issues, as set out in the Arab Peace Initiative.

### The Palestinians see an internationalisation strategy as the only remaining option

The Palestinian leadership sees internationalising the conflict as the only remaining option; in other words, to launch an international campaign to gain broad recognition of Palestinian statehood, with a focus on Europe. This strategy includes re-launching their efforts to gain full membership of the UN, joining international conventions and bodies as a "state" and energising a political and legal campaign against the State of Israel, including at the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

All other strategic options have either failed or are in the process of failing. "Armed struggle" was tried during the Second Intifada and the Palestinians paid a very heavy price for it. Abbas has historically and consistently been opposed to this kind of violence (for practical rather than moral reasons). The Palestinians also believe that bilateral negotiations via US mediation will not yield acceptable results. A third option – reconciliation with Hamas – has also been tried, but is stuck. Abbas is sceptical of its ability to produce results. Another option was presented at the time by Prime Minister Salam Fayyad. It involved building Palestinian state capacity and institutions in a bottom-up process. But, Fayyad was forced out and the current Palestinian leadership does not believe in this strategy.

A fifth strategic option is that of so-called "popular resistance" – such as mass demonstrations, rock throwing as well as car rammings and stabbings (which are violent and lethal but which come under the Palestinian rubric of popular resistance). While Abbas and the Palestinian leadership present this option as legitimate and worthy, they are afraid of it because it's like riding a tiger. They are concerned that this negative energy will turn against them because of public discontent, especially among the young generation. When a wave of stabbings and car rammings broke out in late 2015, the Palestinian leadership were ambivalent and slow to respond. They ultimately intervened to try and prevent the violent attacks because they understood it was not only futile but also dangerous to them.

After analysing these options, the Palestinian leadership is left with one option. This is what

Abbas is focusing on today; to internationalise the conflict and gain broad recognition for Palestinian statehood.

From a Palestinian perspective, internationalising the conflict also means internationalising potential negotiations with Israel. This involves replacing the old paradigm of bilateral negotiations based on exclusive American mediation with a model similar to the P5+1 with Iran – an international mediation setting with Americans, Europeans, Russians, Chinese, and others. This approach was highlighted in Abbas's 20 February speech to the UN Security Council. The Palestinians are likely to score very modest results from this strategy. Only some minor European nations, such as Slovenia, Belgium, Luxembourg and Ireland have already promised, or are about to, recognise a Palestinian state. Recognition by one of the major European states appears less likely at this stage, although if nothing changes in the crisis between the US and Palestinians it is possible that one of them – potentially France – could recognise a Palestinian state at a later stage, which could be significant.

## The challenges and dilemmas of the Gaza Strip

Israel's Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot recently warned about the dangers of escalation in Gaza. In addition to the dire economic situation (expressed in very high rates of unemployment) and the collapse of basic infrastructure – electricity, water, sewage and other services – the situation has been exacerbated by the stalled reconciliation process between Hamas and the PA, which many hoped would bring positive change to Gaza.<sup>1</sup>

The reconciliation process is stuck in a type of “half pregnancy”. Hamas has given up the civilian sphere, transferring powers and responsibilities to the PA, and now regard themselves as no longer responsible for carrying the headache of feeding nearly 2m Palestinians in Gaza. Yet the PA claims not all authority has been transferred and that it cannot fully exercise its responsibility in Gaza while Hamas refuses to disarm and give up its hold on security in

the Strip. The PA has therefore not rescinded all of its punitive measures against Gaza. In this situation, neither Hamas nor the PA have assumed responsibility for fixing the problems for Gazans themselves. The international community has not done enough, in terms of funding, to address the basic humanitarian issues such as the crisis of infrastructure. Ultimately it's the people of Gaza who are paying the price and suffering.

Following the meeting of donors in Brussels at the end of January, there is hope that there will be significant progress on fixing some of the basic problems in Gaza, because it has finally dawned on some of the major actors that the situation is explosive and things can escalate.<sup>2</sup>

The main change is that the US is now willing to play a dominant role in the process. This, coupled with the fact that Egypt, Israel – which presented a billion dollar infrastructure plan – and some other important donors in the European Union are all on board and fuelled by a sense of urgency, means we may see some real progress in fixing some of the basic maladies of Gaza. This is the impression from people who participated in the donors meeting.

Hamas is an avowed enemy of Israel, controls security in Gaza, invests in weapons at the expense of the population, flirts with Iran and Hezbollah, initiates terror attacks in the West Bank and holds the remains of the bodies of IDF soldiers and some Israeli hostages as a bargaining chip. But it is still in Israel's interest to bring the infrastructure in Gaza to a basic level where people can have 24 (rather than four) hours of electricity a day. The same is true for water and sewage. Beyond that point, Israel should apply pressure on Hamas to deter it and pressurise it to return the Israeli bodies and hostages. These humanitarian steps also shouldn't be conditioned on reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas because the chances for this are very slim.

The dilemma is how to do this without benefitting Hamas. People in Gaza understand that after ruling for a decade and bringing about three rounds of armed conflict with Israel,

1 For a detailed background about the inter-Palestinian reconciliation process see: <http://www.bicom.org.uk/analysis/palestinian-reconciliation-agreement-context-consequences-open-questions/>

2 The fragility of current security situation was once again demonstrated by the explosion of the IED that injured four IDF soldiers on the 17th February – which was the most serious incident along the border since Operation Protective Edge in the summer of 2014

devastation, isolation, and an acute economic and humanitarian crisis, Hamas and its policies bear major responsibility for the deteriorating situation. The message to the people of Gaza should therefore be that positive change is occurring despite, not because of, Hamas.

The alternative – not doing anything as long as Hamas is in control – is much worse. Even today, sewage is flowing into the Mediterranean and paralysing some of Israel’s desalination plants. In Gaza, there is currently an initiative gathering momentum to drive thousands of people to march on the Israeli border to protest the dire situation. Notwithstanding Israel’s problems with Hamas it is in Israel’s interest to address Gaza’s problems. International and regional actors are also finally moving in that direction in a more effective manner than we have hitherto seen.

## Conclusion

We are currently in a deep political crisis, first and foremost between the US and the Palestinians. It will be very challenging to try and stop Abbas from pushing his internationalisation strategy and get him back in the US-led peace process. The leverage on him is limited because the Arab states are less willing to play that role and the Europeans are not really pressuring him either. The US is not mulling a Plan B but rather preparing its Plan A. Unlike the Obama administration, the Trump team is unwilling to pay a price to bring the Palestinians back to the table. Instead, they are threatening to punish them for not returning and for launching alternative initiatives.

While Israel is quietly watching this dynamic, the more right-wing elements in Israel’s governing coalition (also sensing the Prime Minister’s vulnerability because of the police investigations) are striving to tie the Prime Minister’s hands and propose settlement activities and annexation initiatives. The present political atmosphere in Israel is such that although it attaches high importance to maintaining close US-Israel relations, it precludes any meaningful Israeli-Palestinian political process.

I don’t see how this whole dynamic is going to be reversed and who is going to reverse it. So in that sense I am not very optimistic that the dust will

settle and we will be back in the peace process sooner or later. The different stakeholders have to begin to consider a Plan B.

It is time for real progress in Gaza to improve its economy and fix its broken infrastructure. Internal Palestinian reconciliation is going nowhere and is not going to solve the problems of Gaza. External stakeholders should finally seize the initiative and move ahead.

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*Since 1993, Brigadier General (Res.) Michael Herzog has participated in most of Israel’s negotiations with the Palestinians, Jordanians and Syrians, whilst serving in senior positions in the IDF and in Israel’s ministry of defence. In the course of his career, Michael Herzog served as head of the Strategic Planning Division of the IDF and worked with four defence ministers as senior military aide and advisor, and as chief of staff. From June 2009 to March 2010, he served as special emissary for Israel’s prime minister and minister of defence in the efforts to relaunch the peace process. As well as being a Senior Visiting Fellow at BICOM, he is an international fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.*

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[For more information please contact:](#)

Charlotte Henry, Senior Press Officer

020 3745 3348

07879 644099

[charlotteh@bicom.org.uk](mailto:charlotteh@bicom.org.uk)