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The Palestinian cause: What does Riyadh want from Abbas?

Mohamed Abu Saada

Palestinian Authority President and Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Mahmoud Abbas arrived in Saudi Arabia on Monday, November 7, 2017 in a one-day visit to the Kingdom at the invitation of Saudi King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz. Abbas was received by Prince Faisal bin Bandar bin Abdulaziz, Governor of Riyadh Region, Musaid bin Mohammed Al Aiban, Minister of State and member of the Council of Ministers, and Maj. General Abdul Aziz Al Zammami, the Police Chief of Riyadh Region, before he later met with King Salman. The surprise visit of PA President Abbas to Riyadh raised many questions about its purpose, at a time when Saudi Arabia is witnessing a lot of hot events. However, by analysing the media reports on the visit, the Saudi-Palestinian talks can be summarized as follows:

First: Palestinian reconciliation

Many reports indicate that the Saudi leadership has asked the Palestinian Authority to pressure Hamas leaders to sever ties with Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah - as additional items to the reconciliation agreement - and to dismiss a large number of Hamas employees as a precondition for providing 20 million dollars on a monthly basis to Gaza Strip. Saudi Arabia is seeking to be one of the investors in the reconstruction process in the strip as part of its efforts to strengthen and consolidate its regional position as leader of the Sunni Axe in the Arab region.

Here, a series of questions arise about the Saudi demands regarding the Palestinian reconciliation: Will Hamas accept severing ties with Iran? To what extent can Abbas

influence Hamas on the movement's relationship with Iran? How will Saudi Arabia balance its demands in a way that could not foil the efforts of its ally, Egypt, with respect to the reconciliation? Will the Egyptian-Saudi relations be strained in the coming days?

Second: Saudi moves towards Iran and Hezbollah

Some observers said that the main reason for inviting Abbas to Saudi Arabia was the latter's attempt to extract a supportive Palestinian position on the Saudi confrontation with Iran, given the importance and specificity of the Palestinian position. So, Saudi Arabia seeks to control the Palestinian and Lebanese issues so that it could neutralize Iran's most important 'Resistance' card, which the Islamic Republic considers the cornerstone of its foreign policy. Also, Saudi Arabia had to act immediately and urgently to block the results of the recent visit by a Hamas delegation headed by Saleh Al-Arouri, deputy head of its political bureau, to Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah, and announcing that their relations with Iran are strategic.

Some sources within Fatah said that Saudi Arabia recommended Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to prevent Palestinian forces in the Lebanon-based Palestinian refugee camps from establishing any alliances with Hezbollah if any military strikes were launched against Lebanon.

This possibility was reinforced by the remarks by Azzam Al-Ahmad, Fatah Central Committee member and the Movement's Commissioner of National Relations (i.e. between Hamas and Fatah) warning that "there are many regional forces that want to plunge the Palestinian camps in Lebanon into internal Lebanese differences." He called on the children of the Palestinian camps to stay away from the internal differences in Lebanon, stressing that that there have recently been contacts with the Authority in this regard, and that the PA confirmed it is not a party to the Lebanese crisis.

There are 12 official Palestinian camps in Lebanon, that were set up by the Lebanese government and the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for the Palestine refugees. These camps have their own security forces and include a number of armed groups belonging to Fatah (Abbas wing), Fatah (Dahlan wing), Hamas, and leftist groups which have distinct relations with the Syrian regime, and therefore they are very close to the agenda of Iran and Hezbollah.

It should be noted that the different ideologies of the Palestinian armed groups in Lebanon indicate that it is difficult for the Palestinian Authority to have absolute control over them. However, the poor economic conditions of Palestinians in the refugee camps make them vulnerable to different pressures. This means that if a war is launched by Israel against Lebanon, although it is an unlikely scenario under the current circumstances, the Palestinian armed factions in Lebanon will be motivated to participate in repelling the Israeli aggression.

Third: The 'Deal of the Century'

Saudi Arabia has practiced pressures on President Mahmoud Abbas to accept US President Donald Trump's plan to achieve "peace" in the Middle East, known as the "Deal of the Century", according to some news websites, especially after the meeting between Saudi leadership and Jason Greenblatt, the US Special Envoy to the peace process, and Jared Kushner, the White House adviser, during their "secret" visit to Riyadh about two weeks before Abbas's visit to Saudi Arabia.

"The United States is preparing for unveiling the Trump plan to revive the stalled peace process," Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman told the Palestinian president, adding that "Trump presents a peace plan between Israel and the Palestinians on the basis of the two-state solution in broad terms as well as a solution to the issue of Palestinian

refugees, in return for generous support from Arab countries, most notably Saudi Arabia and the UAE, to the Palestinian Authority.

The sources pointed out that although President Abbas expressed his dissatisfaction with the plan, but because of his difficult and weak position, he has no choice but to move forward with this plan or to resign. Abbas reportedly described the deal that Trump talked about as “nothing but a bubble that has been inflated and intimidated,” according to the sources, adding that Abbas has not yet responded to the Saudis."

What is expected from Abbas?

A deep reading of all the previous possibilities indicates that there is a U.S. deal for the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, and that Saudi Arabia will be the process's Arab and regional guarantor. It has become apparent that the Arab countries want to shift the Arab compass from (Israel) to (Iran) with respect to the identity of its most dangerous enemy in the region, to be consistent with the American and Israeli vision. The deal is therefore expected to include a declared Arab-Israeli normalization, and a peace agreement between the Palestinians and Israelis that will probably be more based on the Israeli right-wing approach.

Before talking about the reaction of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, we must emphasize that the recent U.S. plan is not the first offer. During the Clinton administration, the United States tried to impose a peace agreement between the Palestinians and the Israelis, offering Palestinians access to the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and East Jerusalem with replacement of land by 3%, which was rejected by Arafat in 2000. When Arafat returned to the Palestinian territories the Palestinian uprising known as the 'Al-Aqsa Intifada' broke out, and accordingly Arafat's residence in Ramallah was besieged for four years, where he received not a single phone call from an Arab leader, and was finally assassinated.

Details of Arafat's tragic end is known well by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who also knows that if he rejects the 'deal of the century', he may have a similar fate. The question is: Will Abbas make such a decision?

In fact, Yasser Arafat was more of a military commander than a political leader. Also, he was a symbolic figure that has great popularity among the Palestinian people. To the contrary, Mahmoud Abbas is a politician and a statesman who hopes to resolve the conflict peacefully.

So, Abbas is expected to adopt an approach that is completely different from that of Arafat. Abbas' stance can be summed up in the following three points:

1) Regarding the Palestinian reconciliation, the practices and mechanisms of the Palestinian Authority towards reconciliation so far are very slow. Although the reconciliation agreement has been in effect for more than a month and a half, the Palestinian Authority has not yet taken any action to alleviate the suffering of the people of Gaza. However, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas will probably accelerate implementation of the reconciliation in the coming days if only he feels that the Palestinian reconciliation is necessary to face regional and international pressures. In this case, he will seek to unify the Palestinian efforts to benefit from the capabilities of Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

2) Regarding the Palestinian-Iranian relations, Abbas will most likely be reluctant to sever relations between Hamas and Iran. However, the Palestinian president may not do so for two reasons: First, because he cannot determine the foreign policy of Palestinian factions. Second, because his political expertise will most likely make him avoid aligning with some parties against some others, in light of the rapid and complicated regional changes. Even though, Abbas may recommend all Palestinian

factions not to engage in any regional disputes or wars to come, specifically in the Lebanese arena.

3) As for the so-called "Deal of the Century", it is known that Abbas always presents himself as a "man of peace", but his peaceful ambition is to get the offer that was presented to Arafat in the year 2000, i.e. a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders, and a fair solution for Palestinian refugees.

Therefore, Abbas is expected to wait until an American offer on the 'deal of the century' is officially declared so that he could make his decision. Perhaps, the United States was told that Abbas may reject the deal, which explains the recent U.S. refusal to allow the existence of the PLO office in Washington, using it as a pressure card.

Abbas will probably not be able to accept any "weak" offer for a peace agreement with Israel unless a consensus of all the Palestinian factions is reached to avoid bearing responsibility for this decision alone. Also, Abbas may resort to holding a popular referendum, through which he can reject the American proposal in a diplomatic way. However, this step would anger the United States, the Israeli occupation, and many Arab regimes, and might lead to punitive measures against Abbas and the Palestinian Authority, including imposition of an economic blockade on the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. In this case, the Palestinian arena is expected to witness a new popular uprising in the West Bank and military confrontations in the Gaza Strip.

Also, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas may be prompted to resign to avoid the fate of former Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, and appoint a Palestinian figure close to him as his successor, for blocking the access of Mohamed Dahlan to the PA presidency. Accordingly, the Palestinian Authority is likely to be dissolved and replaced by autonomous municipal councils in coordination with the Israeli administrative authorities.