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Trump's decision

Mohamed Abu Saada



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TURKEY- ISTANBUL

Bahçelievler, Yenibosna Mh 29 Ekim Cad. No: 7 A2 Blok 3. Plaza D: 64
Tel/Fax: +90 212 227 2262 E-Mail: info@eis-eg.org



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Introduction

Since the inauguration of Donald Trump as President of the United States until his decision to move the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem on December 6, 2017, the Palestinian National Authority (PA) appears to be in an unenviable situation. The Israeli government, made up of a hard-line rightist coalition, does not waste time in exploiting Trump's existence in the White House in devouring the rest of the Palestinian territories and destroying the principle of a "two-state solution" that the current peace process is supposed to build on.

In the face of this, the Palestinian Authority finds itself in a difficult reality, without having many options or powerful pressure cards, amid a prevailing state of weakness and chaos in the Arab region. These and other challenges make the future of the Palestinian Authority at stake.

First Axis: Challenges to Palestinian Authority

First: Internal pressures

1- Problems related to PA foundation

When the Palestinian Authority was established in the wake of the 1993 Oslo Accords, the late Palestinian President Yasser Arafat believed that the Palestinian Authority was the first building brick of the Palestinian state. Therefore, most of Arafat's interest was focused on building the Palestinian Authority, even at the expense of Fatah movement and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). However, the Israeli leaders considered the PA as an administrative and security authority that could reduce its burdens towards the Palestinian people. This left negative repercussions on the entire Palestinian political system, especially after many Palestinian movements, most notably Hamas, opposed the tendencies of Fatah movement and the Palestinian Authority, and moved towards seeking an alternative representative for the Palestine people, other than the PLO.



2- Problems related to Palestinian division

Since the events of 2007 and the political separation between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank - already separated geographically - the Palestinian Authority has witnessed a state of fragmentation in its political and service role, amid “marginalization” of the PLO, and existence of a government in the West Bank "powered by the PA president" and another government in Gaza Strip “lacking legitimacy”. This created a state of chaos in the Palestinian political system, and had negative effects on the Palestinian issue. Despite the fact that there were several attempts to end the Palestinian division, however, they all failed at the end due to the following reasons:

- a) Lack of trust between the two sides (Fatah and Hamas),
- b) Differences on the form of Palestinian resistance and the fate of its weapons,
- c) Falling under regional and international pressures, which hinders the efforts of the Palestinian reconciliation, whether directly or indirectly,
- d) The long period of Palestinian division – for more than ten years – has created a state of fear of bearing its consequences.

3- PA poor economic conditions

The Palestinian Authority's budget for 2017 was 4.4 billion dollars, about 50 % of which is supposed to be through foreign aid, divided as follows: the United States 750 million dollars, the European Union half a billion euros, and the Arab countries half a billion dollars. In 2016, these amounts were reduced to less than 50 %: The United States has reduced its support from 750 million to 400 million, then to 122 million and now threatens to cut it off after the Palestinian Authority's moves against the decision of President Trump. The European Union's aid also declined to 300 million euros. Finally, the amounts paid by all the Arab countries declined to only 150 million dollars on instalments. In addition, a large part of the Palestinian economy remains at the mercy of the Israeli economy.

4- Absence of charismatic leaders in PA

The Palestinian street believes that the current Palestinian leadership in power is weak and unable to shoulder the responsibilities entrusted to them. The crisis could become worse if the current Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, died. At least, Abu Mazen keeps a partial balance in the current Palestinian Authority.



Second: Israeli pressures

The challenges facing the Palestinian Authority are not limited to Trump's decision to transfer the US Embassy to Jerusalem as the capital of "Israel" only. In fact, Trump's decision gave the right-wing parties, participating in the Israeli government, a good appetite to devour large areas of the West Bank and separate its north from its south, in addition to separating Jerusalem from them. This was confirmed by the Minister of Education and the leader of "The Jewish Home" party, Naftali Bennett, when he revealed a plan to grant the Palestinians a demilitarized self-rule on about 40% of the West Bank (WB) and the annexation of the remaining 60 % of the WB territories to "Israel".

The "unified Jerusalem" law, which prevents any Israeli government from negotiating any part of Jerusalem without the approval of a special majority of at least eighty out of 120 members (two thirds of the Knesset members), is a step in this direction. This talk comes in light of the search for alternative homeland projects (for the Palestinians), whether in Jordan or Sinai.

Also, Minister of Housing and Construction Yoav Gallant has recently announced that his government plans to build one million new settlement units in the occupied West Bank within the next 20 years, noting that about 20-30% of them will be built in Jerusalem alone. The Israeli leaders are also seeking a new US recognition of Israel as a "Jewish state", as a second step after Trump's decision on Jerusalem.

Third: External pressures

In addition to the internal problems faced by the Palestinian Authority, there are also external problems including the absence of Arab and Islamic backing for the Palestinian cause because of their preoccupation with their intra-differences, such as the Gulf crisis. Furthermore, some observers believe that the Palestinian issue is manipulated by some countries to achieve their own visions, whether in the files of "normalization" or "hostility towards Iran". New York Times has recently reported that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman practiced pressures on the PA president to make concessions in favor of Israel.

The Arab position, along with the negative role played by the United States towards the Palestinian Authority, politically and economically, are in favor of Israel. Despite

the Palestinian Authority has been aware of the role of the US in supporting the Israelis, but the United States is now moving according to pure Israeli visions.

Second Axis: Scenarios for the future of PA

Scenario 1: PA survival

It is expected that the PA will continue to exist in the medium perspective, taking one of the following forms:

First possibility: The situation remains as it is

The Palestinian Authority may succeed in surpassing Trump's decision on Jerusalem and silencing the Palestinian street after taking steps in the UN Security Council and General Assembly, which has already happened recently. The Palestinian Authority may submit complaints to the International Criminal Court to open an official investigation into the war crimes committed by Israel, especially the settlement issue and the conditions of Palestinian prisoners in the Israeli prisons. The PA may also resort to other political options, including declaration of rejecting the United States as a mediator in the Palestinian-Israeli peace process. In this way, the PA will restrict its moves to diplomatic responses only. However, these measures may succeed in convincing the Palestinian street of the Palestinian Authority's moves, and put pressure on the United States and Israel, leading to the survival of the Palestinian Authority and its institutions.

Second possibility: Existence of a disintegrated Palestinian Authority

The Palestinian Authority may remain but divided and fragmented. After recent statements by both the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, we can say that the recent Egyptian efforts in the file of Palestinian reconciliation have failed. This brings the Palestinian arena closer to a return to the "first square" - before the Egyptian efforts - that is, the return of the administrative committee of Hamas in ruling Gaza again, being part of a besieged government that can fall at any moment.

As for the future of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, it will face many problems among the leaders of the Fatah movement after the death of the current Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. It is almost certain that there are internal conflicts within Fatah on the succession of Abbas, between Mahmoud Al-Aloul, "Fatah

veteran man", the Gazan Mohammed Dahlan and his rival Jibril Rajoub, former security men, and Majed Faraj, the head of the Palestinian Authority's general intelligence service, and Saeb Erekat, the chief negotiator. Despite the latter's illness, he has existing fortunes due to his political experience. However, Western economic sources may consider Salam Fayyad, the former Palestinian prime minister, as the right man to succeed Abbas in light of the internal rivalry inside Fatah movement.

Third possibility: A Palestinian authority in Gaza

The Gaza Strip is a fundamental pillar in the future of the Palestinian state, whether through connecting the strip with parts of the West Bank, or with Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. Fatah and Hamas seem to be well aware of this reality, which explains, among other reasons, Fatah's acceptance of reconciliation with Hamas, through recent Egyptian efforts. Also, Hamas' awareness of the importance of Gaza provides an explanation for the movement's adherence to the Gaza Strip and unwillingness to abandon it completely. This was confirmed by the sudden move by the Likud party under Netanyahu, through the unified Jerusalem project and the right to expand settlements in the West Bank. In addition to being an escalation against the movements of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas after the Trump decision, the Likud party moves emphasize the intention to restrict the PA role to the Gaza Strip after imposition of control over the West Bank by Israel, whether through military, administrative, tribal or any other form.

Second Scenario: PA dissolution

First possibility: Movement of leadership outside Palestine

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas has repeatedly asked his aides to review the procedures for transferring the Palestinian authority to municipalities. Although there is no concrete plan to dismantle the Palestinian Authority, there are voices calling for exempting the PA of its obligations under the Oslo Accords. This idea is supported by some figures such as Nabil Shaath, Yasser Abed Rabbo, Mahmoud Al-Aloul, and others - like Dr. Sari Nusseibeh. The transference of the Palestinian leadership abroad may come through the rehabilitation of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, or through the development of a new Palestinian political order. The idea of "dissolving

the Palestinian Authority" could be strengthened if Mahmoud al-Aloul - a strong candidate described by the Israeli government as the head of the Fatah terrorist hardliners - Mohammed Ghneim or Abu al-Enein, both opposed the Oslo accords from the beginning.

The obstacle that may prevent the Palestinian Authority from being dissolved and the Palestinian leadership from moving abroad can be summed up in the advantages enjoyed by the PA's influential men, and the keenness of the United States, Israel and Arab countries on survival of the Palestinian Authority. It is also expected that the current Arab regimes will refuse to absorb the institutions of the new PLO and its leaders on their territories.

Second possibility: Collapse of Palestinian political system

There is a situation that can be described as a "silent rebellion" against the existence of the Palestinian Authority, which is considered a prelude to the PA collapse. Apart from the Palestinian rebellion in 2006 through election of Hamas in the legislative elections, there are other movements that have not received adequate media coverage. In Hebron, prominent figures have recently called the governor appointed by the Palestinian Authority to stop 'unnecessary' intervention in the city's local trade. In East Jerusalem, prominent families asked the PA-appointed governor residing outside the city to similarly refrain from intervention. In Jenin, the governor, Mousa Qadoura, died of a heart attack after opening fire on his home by unidentified assailants.

In view of the recent moves by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas against the Trump decision, the Israeli authorities are expected to impose financial, administrative and political sanctions on the Palestinian Authority, which would intentionally or unintentionally lead to the collapse of the Palestinian Authority.

Third Scenario: Birth of a new Palestinian authority

First: Arab influence

Israeli analyst Jackie Khoji said that the future of the leadership of the Palestinian Authority led by Mahmoud Abbas is still vague, while there are moves by Egypt, under Sisi, and Jordan, under King Abdullah, to play a bigger role in the Palestinian file after the departure of Mahmoud Abbas. Khoji said in an article in Maariv that observers of



Egyptian-Israeli relations note that there are new winds blowing from Cairo carrying new plans in relation to the Palestinian file. He pointed out that there is a new political map of the Palestinian file hiding behind the new Egyptian efforts, stressing that Cairo in the meantime exploits available opportunities, especially as Abbas's term may end in a year or two.

The recent Arab move may replace the current Palestinian Authority, with direct or indirect Arab authority - by appointing Palestinian people in accordance with the Arab vision. Apparently, Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia do not see Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as such a bad decision and believe that benefits can be derived from it. So, they seem to have decided to focus on trying to take over the Palestinian issue completely instead of the Palestinian president.

Arab League Secretary-General Ahmed Aboul Gheit has recently announced the formation of a committee headed by him and the membership of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Palestinian Authority to lead the policy of addressing the issue of Jerusalem, after accusing President Abbas of meddling Arab-American relations through his statements.

In the light of the expected disturbances in Jordan, some have begun to discuss the possibility of re-linking the West Bank and Jordan through a special arrangement in which the West Bank will become a semi-independent Jordanian state. Some Jordanian officials have suggested opening up to this idea.

Second: A new authority

This means that the Palestinian arena could witness the birth of a new Palestinian authority, composed of new elites that are far from the familiar faces of the current Palestinian leadership. Such authority may come in accordance with several factors, including:

First, popular movements in the Palestinian street that can be called "Palestinian Spring" in the West Bank or the Gaza Strip as a state of indignation over the present political and life conditions.

Second, the Palestinian parties may agree on the need to hold Palestinian legislative and presidential elections with surprising results and emergence of new figures. This opportunity may be enhanced if the new Palestinian elites are supported by some countries.

Third, the leaders of Fatah, Hamas and perhaps Islamic Jihad may resort to choosing an academic elite to represent them in future elections because they feel that the Palestinian street is not convinced of the capabilities of the current Palestinian leadership.

Conclusion

Despite the current changes, there is an international Israeli Arab desire to preserve the current Palestinian Authority, which reinforces the likelihood of the first scenario (Survival of the current Palestinian Authority) at least in the foreseeable future. Also, the Palestinian Authority will be keen on survival, hoping that the coming Israeli elections next March, 2018, may lead to the formation of a more moderate coalition government between the "Likud" and "Labor Party" that can improve the situation of the Palestinian Authority. The Palestinian Authority is also aware that if the PA is dissolved, the economy in the Palestinian territories will collapse in all sectors of health, education, communications, water and energy. More than 150,000 Palestinian workers will be exposed to loss of income, which will raise the unemployment rate to unprecedented levels by more than 70%. Such situation can also lead to high rates of poverty, crime and absence of law, which will increase the possibilities of the occurrence of internal Palestinian violence, as well as Palestinian-Israeli confrontations.