

Mahmoud Abbas. Cornering a Brave Palestinian “Man of Peace”

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Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas stands now at a crossroads of his people's national struggle for liberation and independence as well as of his political life career, cornered between the rock of his own rejecting constituency and the hard place of his Israeli occupying power and the US sponsors of their bilateral negotiations, which were resumed last July 29, despite his minesweeping concessions and backtracking "on all his redlines."

Unmercifully pressured by both Israeli negotiators and American mediators, the elusive cause of peace stands about to loose in Abbas a brave Palestinian man of peace-making of an historical stature whose demise would squander what could be the last opportunity for the so-called two-state solution.

To continue pressuring Abbas into yielding more concessions without any reciprocal rewards is turning a brave man into an adventurer committing historical and strategic mistakes in the eyes of his people, a trend that if continued would in no time disqualify him of a personal weight that is a prerequisite to make his people accept his “painful” concessions.

The emerging, heavily “pro-Israel” US-proposed framework agreement “appears to ask the Palestinians to accept peace terms that are worse than the Israeli ones they already rejected ... that it would all but compel the Palestinians to reject it,” Larry Derfner wrote in *The National Interest* on this February 3.

Abbas “rejects all transitional, partial and temporary solutions,” his spokesman Nabil Abu Rdaineh said on last January 5, but that’s exactly what the leaks of the blueprint of the “framework agreement” reveal.

Reportedly, the international Quartet on the Middle East, comprising the US, EU, UN and Russia, meeting on the sidelines of the Munich security conference last week, supported US Secretary of State John Kerry’s efforts to commit Palestinian and Israeli negotiators to his proposed “framework agreement.”

Europe is also tightening the rope around Abbas’ neck. If the current US-backed framework agreement talks with Israel fail, Europe will not automatically continue to support the Palestinian Authority, Israel’s Walla website reported on last January 29.

However, The US envoy Martyn Indyk said on last January 31 that Kerry will be proposing the “framework agreement” to the Palestinian and Israeli negotiators “within a few weeks,” but the State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki on the same day “clarified” in a statement that the “contents of the framework” are not “final” because “this is an ongoing process and these decisions have not yet been made.”

Historic versus Political Decisions

Israeli President Shimon Peres on last January 30, during a joint press conference with the envoy of the Middle East Quartet, Tony Blair, said that there is “an opportunity” now to make “historic decisions, not political ones” for the “two-state solution” of the Arab – Israeli conflict and that “we are facing the most crucial time since the establishment of the new Middle East in 1948,” i.e. since what the Israeli historian Ilan Pappé called the “ethnic cleaning” of the Arabs of Palestine and the creation of Israel on their ancestral land.

Peres on the same occasion said that he was “convinced” that Abbas wants “seriously” to make peace with Israel, but what Peres failed to note was that “historic decisions” are made by historic leaders and that such a leader is still missing in Israel since the assassination of late former premier Yitzhak Rabin in 1995, but already available in the person of President Abbas, whom Peres had more than once confirmed as the Palestinian peace “partner,” defying his country’s official denial of the existence of such a partner on the Palestinian side.

Abbas’ more than two – decade unwavering commitment to peace, negotiations, renunciation of violence and the two –state solution has earned him a semi-consensus rejection and opposition to his fruitless efforts among his own people. He is defying his own Fatah-led Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) constituency, let alone his Hamas-led non-PLO political rivals, who have opposed his decision to resume bilateral negotiations with Israel and are overwhelmingly rejecting the leaked components of Kerry’s “framework agreement.”

“Abbas is perhaps the last Palestinian leader today with some measure of faith in the diplomatic process,” Elhanan Miller, wrote in *The Times of Israel* this February 3. Palestinian “pressure” is mounting on him even from members of his own Fatah party and “his negotiating team crumbled” when negotiator Mohammed Shtayyeh resigned in November last year. In an interview recorded especially for the conference of Tel Aviv’s Institute for National Security Studies in the previous week, Abbas “indicated he may not be able to withstand the pressure much longer,” Miller wrote.

“Abbas is in an unenviable position these days. As negotiations with Israel enter the final third of their nine-month time frame,” the Palestinian president stands “cornered” between a Palestinian rejection “and an Israeli leadership bent on depicting him as an uncompromising extremist,” according to Miller, who quoted the Israeli Intelligence Minister Yuval Steinitz as describing Abbas in the previous week as “the foremost purveyor of anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli venom.”

Similar Israeli “political” demonization of an historic figure like Abbas led Jamie Stern-Weiner, of the New Left Project, writing in *GlobalResearch* online on last January 11, to expect that, “It’s possible that Abbas will get a bullet in his head!” Jamie was not taking things too far in view of Kerry’s warning, reported by Palestinian Authority (PA) officials, that Abbas could face the fate of his predecessor Yasser Arafat.

Israel’s chief negotiator, Tzipi Livni, stated on last January 25 that Abbas’ positions are “unacceptable to us” and threatened the Palestinians “to pay the price” if he sticks to them.

“This is a clear threat to Abbas in person and it must be taken seriously,” the PA Foreign Minister Riyad al-Malki told reporters soon after. “We will distribute Livni’s statements to all

foreign ministers and the international community. We can't remain silent towards these threats," he added.

Israeli demonization was not confined to Abbas; it hit also at Kerry as "hurtful," "unfair," "intolerable," "obsessive," "messianic" and expects Israel "to negotiate with a gun to its head." US National Security Adviser Susan Rice "tweeted" in response to convey, according to Haaretz on this February 5, that "Israeli insulters have crossed the red line of diplomatic etiquette!"

Minesweeping Concessions

Abbas' demonization was the Israeli reward for the minesweeping concessions he had already made to make the resumed negotiations a success, risking a growing semi-consensus opposition at home:

* Abbas had backtracked on his own previously proclaimed precondition for the resumption of bilateral negotiations with Israel, namely freezing the accelerating expansion of the illegal Israeli Jewish settlements in the Palestinian territories, which Israel militarily occupied in 1967, at least temporarily during the resumed negotiations.

* Thereafter, according to Tzvi Ben-Gedalyahu, writing in The Jewish Press on this February 3, Abbas "has essentially backtracked on all his redlines, except for" heeding Israel's insistence on recognizing it as a "Jewish state," which is a new Israeli unilaterally demanded precondition that even the Jordanian Foreign Minister, Nasser Judeh, considered "unacceptable" on this February 2 despite his country's peace treaty with Israel.

* In his interview with The New York Times on this February 2, Abbas reiterated his repeated pledge not to allow a third Intifada, or uprising: "In my life, and if I have any more life in the future, I will never return to the armed struggle," he said, thus voluntarily depriving himself from a successfully tested source of a negotiating power and a legitimate instrument of resisting foreign military occupation ordained by the international law and the UN charter.

* In the same interview he yielded to the Israeli precondition of "demilitarizing" any future state of Palestine, thus compromising the sovereignty of such a state beforehand. Ignoring the facts that Israel is a nuclear power, a state of weapons of mass destruction, the regional military superpower and the world's forth military exporter, he asked: "Do you think we have any illusion that we can have any security if the Israelis do not feel they have security?"

* Further compromising the sovereignty of any future state of Palestine, Abbas, according to the Times interview, has proposed to US Secretary Kerry that an American-led NATO force, not a UN force, patrol a future Palestinian state "indefinitely, with troops positioned throughout the territory, at all crossings, and within Jerusalem;" he seemed insensitive to the fact that his people would see such a force with such a mandate as merely the Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) operating under the NATO flag and in its uniforms.

* Abbas even agreed that the IOF "could remain in the West Bank for up to five years" — and not three as he had recently stated — provided that "Jewish settlements" are "phased out of the new Palestinian state along a similar timetable."

* Not all "Jewish settlements" however. Very well aware of international law, which prohibits the transfer of people by an occupying power like Israel from or to the occupied territories,

Abbas nonetheless had early enough accepted the principle of proportional land swapping whereby the major colonial settlements, mainly within Greater Jerusalem borders, which are home to some eighty percent of more than half a million illegal Jewish settlers in the West Bank, would be annexed to Israel. This concession is tantamount to accepting the division of the West Bank between its Palestinian citizens and its illegal settlers.

* Yet, what Abbas had described as the “historic,” “very difficult,” “courageous” and “painful” concession Palestinians had already made dates back very much earlier, when the Palestine National Council adopted in 1988 the Declaration of Independence, which was based on the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution No. 181 (II) of 29 November 1947; then “we agreed to establish the State of Palestine on only 22% of the territory of historical Palestine – on all the Palestinian Territory occupied by Israel in 1967,” he told the UNGA in September 2011.

* Accordingly, Abbas repeatedly voices his commitment to the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, which stipulates an “agreed upon” solution of the “problem” of the 1948 Palestinian refugees. Israel is on record that the return of these refugees to their homes according to the UNGA resolution No. 194 (III) of December 11, 1948 is a non-negotiable redline, thus rendering any such “agreed upon” solution a mission impossible. Abbas concession to such a solution is in fact compromising the inalienable rights of more than half of the Palestinian population.

On September 29, 2012, Abbas “once again” repeated “our warning” to the UNGA: “The window of opportunity is narrowing and time is quickly running out. The rope of patience is shortening and hope is withering.”

Out of Conviction, Not out of Options

Abbas is making concessions unacceptable to his people out of deep conviction in peace and unwavering commitment to peaceful negotiations and not because he is out of options.

One of his options was reported in an interview with The New York Times on this February 2, when Abbas said that he had been “resisting pressure” from the Palestinian street and leadership to join the United Nations agencies for which his staff “had presented 63 applications ready for his signature.”

In 2012 the UNGA recognized Palestine as an observer non-member state; reapplying for the recognition of Palestine as a member state is another option postponed by Abbas to give the resumed negotiations with Israel a chance.

Reconciliation with Hamas in the Gaza Strip is a third option that Abbas has been maneuvering not to make since 2005 in order not to alienate Israel and the US away from peace talks because they condemn it as a terrorist organization.

Suspension of the security coordination with Israel is also a possible option, which his predecessor Arafat used to test now and then.

Looking for other players to join the US in co-sponsoring the peace talks with Israel is an option that Abbas made clear in his latest visit to Moscow . “We would like other parties, such as Russia , the European Union, China and UN, to play an influential role in these talks,” the Voice of Russia quoted him as saying on last January 24.

Israel’s DEBKAFfile in an exclusive report on last January 24 considered his Moscow visit an

“exit from the Kerry peace initiative,” labeling it a “diplomatic Intifada” and a “defection” that caught Kerry and Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu “unprepared.”

Abbas’ representative Jibril al-Rjoub on January 27 was in the Iranian capital Tehran for the first time in many years. “Our openness to Iran is a Palestinian interest and part of our strategy to open to the whole world,” al-Rjoub said. Three days later the London-based Al-Quds al-Arabi daily reported that Abbas will be invited to visit Iran soon with the aim of “rehabilitating” the bilateral ties. The Central committee of Fatah, which Abbas leads, on this February 3 said that al-Rjoub’s Tehran visit “comes in line with maintaining international relations in favor of the high interests of our people and the Palestinian cause.”

Opening up to erstwhile “hostile” nations like Iran and Syria is more likely a tactical maneuvering than a strategic shift by Abbas, meant to send the message that all Abbas’ options are open.

However his strategic option would undeniably be to honor his previous repeated threats of resignation, to leave the Israeli Occupation Forces to fend for themselves face to face with the Palestinian people whose status quo is no more sustainable.

Speaking in Munich, Germany, Kerry on this February 1 conveyed the message bluntly: “Today’s status quo, absolutely to a certainty, I promise you 100 percent, cannot be maintained,” Kerry said of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. “It is not sustainable.” Last November, Kerry warned that Israel would face [a Palestinian “third Intifada”](#) if his sponsored talks see no breakthrough.

The loss of Abbas by resignation or by nature would for sure end Kerry’s “peace mission” and make his warning come true.

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