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The Palestinian Question and the Trump Presidency: Current Developments

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Among the promises the U.S. President Donald J. Trump has made is the formulation of a plan to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian issue. To that end, the task was assigned to Jared Kushner, senior adviser to the White House and his son-in law. However, the details of the plan known as the "Deal of the Century" are yet to be released. In the meantime, recent developments, generated by the actions taken by the U.S. administration and their implications on the both Israel and Palestine need to be taken seriously into consideration, as they directly influence the already fragile situation on the ground.

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Contrary to his predecessor, who kept a relatively more moderate stance on issues of heavy gravity, the current president has shifted the American policy towards an overtly pro-Israeli orientation.² In keeping with his promise, he recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and relocated the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to the Holy city of Jerusalem, breaking with decades of U.S. foreign policy. This constituted a heavy blow to the Palestinian side, which in reaction cut off diplomatic talks with the United States on a possible resolution of the conflict. The rationale behind this very particular move as explained by the American president was “to take off the table” an issue that he considered an obstacle for future negotiations.³ However, despite the fulfillment of the well-known Israeli demand and the Trump approach, the outcome for the Palestinian side is twofold. Primarily, the Palestinians are now more than ever convinced that Trump does not intend to mediate ‘in good faith’. Moreover, the Palestinian Authority (PA), whose current approval level among the Palestinian people is rather weak, will probably not be able to take part in any negotiation process that would not include the issue of Jerusalem. The latter also applies to the pressure that other Arab states can put to the PA in order to proceed to the negotiations table. Even if some of them were indeed willing to press the PA to compromise, such an effort would face greater public opposition.⁴ Additionally, such a step would remove any remaining credibility of the PA and empower Hamas as the only solid and ‘reliable’ guard of the Palestinian cause, thus backtracking any possible reconciliation effort between the two. Furthermore, Hamas’ steady unwillingness to hand over total control of Gaza to government in Ramallah and the latter’s recent punitive pressure measures, will continue to place hurdles to a potential unification between the Palestinians, consequently hampering any progress towards a reinforced position for international negotiations.⁵ On the other hand, the decision of the PA to boycott the U.S. launched diplomatic talks, leads -until now- with certainty to greater isolation. On these grounds, there have been voices that call for the removal of the U.S. as a mediator in shake of more unfeigned and productive initiatives taken directly from the sides with immediate interest on the peace process.⁷ This could also mean that the U.S. would disengage from the negotiation process and, by extension, it could be a relief from Washington’s domestic politics influence over the negotiations.⁸ By the same token, there have been voices inside the PA raising the possibility of engaging with other emerging actors within the multipolar international system, such as the BRICS countries or perhaps the EU.⁸ Nevertheless, these countries would probably prefer to distance themselves from undertaking such initiatives, let alone the fact that Israel itself would not be willing to transfer responsibility for the diplomatic talks to any other mediator.

On the same grounds, the U.S. administration took the decision to completely end funding for the UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency).⁹ The defunding of the agency, which was spearheaded by Jared Kushner and the former U.S. Ambassador Nikki Haley, serves multiple purposes. First and foremost, by stating that the agency is “corrupt, inefficient and unhelpful for peace”, Kushner aims at the removal of the ‘refugee’ title from the five million Palestinians it aids, by delegitimizing its work, necessity and credibility. The reasoning behind this initiative is to remove the Palestinians’ ability to exercise their ‘right of return’ after a possible settlement.¹⁰ Even though, the removal of the refugee status from the Palestinians living in Jordan, Egypt, Syria and Lebanon could potentially ease the way for their integration in these countries, it is highly unlikely that the other Arab states would accept such a solution for their own economic and demographic reasons.¹¹ It is noteworthy that while the defunding is also being used as leverage over the PA, the populations that will be most affected are those outside the jurisdiction of the PA, such as the refugees in Gaza and Jordan, amongst others.¹² For the Israelis, the realization of such a right is translated into serious demographic and security concerns of losing the ethnic majority within the state of Israel. Therefore, any scenario that could dilute the Jewish majority is rejected on the grounds of preserving national security. To that end, in order to create precedent, the government encourages Jewish immigration to Israel from all over the world, indirectly providing incentives for settling in areas on and beyond the Green Line.¹³ However, by trying to take the ‘right of return’ off the table as a ‘deal-breaker’ in such a way, the U.S. may not be able to bring the Palestinians back onboard.

Following PA's recall of its ambassador Husam Zomlot, the American government ordered the closure of the PLO's diplomatic mission in Washington.¹⁴ This action came as a means to apply diplomatic pressure over the position of the PA, not to negotiate or even examine an imminent peace plan. Yet, it would be valid to argue that shutting down the few existing diplomatic communication cables is hardly a way to achieve a return to the negotiations table. Also, by employing punitive means as leverage to achieve a reboot of the negotiations process from a position of power, the U.S. administration succeeds to alienate the Palestinians by reflecting an unwillingness to negotiate, aiming at a mutually beneficial agreement.¹⁵ In addition, the recent decision of the U.S. State Department to merge the American General Consulate in Jerusalem into the American embassy is expected to exacerbate the tensions. Up until now, the consulate in Jerusalem operated under special status reporting straight to the State Department. Following the realization of the merge, it will operate through the new embassy in Jerusalem, which is headed by David Friedman, a man who has blatantly supported the Israeli settlement movement.¹⁶ Furthermore, Friedman's level of influence on the drafting of Kushner's peace plan is unprecedented for an American ambassador in Israel and that alone as a fact reinforces the Palestinian belief that the current U.S. administration is disqualified for carrying out fair negotiations.¹⁷

After almost eleven months from the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, the U.S. government reaffirms its commitment to the negotiations process. However, substantial pressure has been applied to the Palestinian side accompanied only by verbal reassurances that "Israel will now have to pay a higher price". Yet, neither the "higher price", nor the "ultimate plan" have been revealed. 'Fragments' of the "deal of the century" that have leaked until now, have little or nothing to do with Israeli concessions. Recent reports suggest that Abbas was offered a plan based on a confederation with Jordan. Even though, both the Palestinians and the Jordanians consider such a scenario as an outcome of a two-state solution, rather than an initial approach to set the foundations for it.¹⁸ In the same spirit, there have reportedly been discussions between the U.S. team and the Egyptians about the settlement of Palestinians in the Sinai region combined with a massive relief employment programme that will be proposed, thus implementing the Israeli plan for 'Greater Gaza'.¹⁹

Last but not least, to an increasingly deteriorating situation, what the imminent plan will present and what is the level of compromise, it remains to be seen. However, hitherto, the use of the 'stick' exclusively against the Palestinians and the sidelining of the PA can only prolong the stalemate and may generate higher security risks for both the Palestinians and the Israelis.²⁰

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