

ARTICLE



The Future of the Palestinian Authority

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Abstract

The Oslo Agreement signed between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) in 1993 created indirect control over the Palestinians, a better and cheaper strategy than direct control, where the Israeli government transferred administrative and security responsibilities to the Palestinian Authority (PA) in Gaza and the West Bank. Some Palestinian politicians and scholars consider the direct coordination and cooperation between the Israeli and Palestinian security forces as an Israeli vision that was adopted in the peace agreements to perpetuate the occupation. However, others believe the PA to be the administrative basis of a future Palestinian state. Without evidence of existential progress toward this goal, many have begun to question the need for the Authority, which has failed to carry out national tasks. Currently, the PA appears to be in an existential crisis. The Palestinians are increasingly criticising it, and many have sought to distance themselves from government involvement in local affairs. Moreover, some of its leaders have called for its dissolution. The PA is encircled by Israeli concerns and problematic and overlapping Palestinian partisan interests. This research gives an explanation of the future scenarios of the PA two decades after its establishment, and explores the possibility of redefining its role, taking into account the significant developments in the Palestinian new status at the UN, Palestinian reconciliation, and the efforts to revive and rebuild the PLO



Keywords

Oslo Agreement, Palestinian Authority, dissolution, Palestinian State, Israel

1. INTRODUCTION

The Israeli-Palestinian peace agreements emphasised the demilitarisation of the PA, with the exception of some security forces to maintain law and order in the Palestinian self-ruled areas. Security protocols established joint patrol units along the Israeli borders in order to prevent military attacks from the Palestinian self-ruled areas against Israeli targets. The Israeli government convinced the Israelis that the peace process exempted the Israeli military forces from the burden of the occupation, and that the PA would take this responsibility. This meant the establishment of strong Palestinian security forces to carry out these duties and to be compatible with Israeli security logic.

The PA leadership provided concessions and offered cooperation with the Israeli government, while the arbitrary Israeli policies against the Palestinians continued. In the meantime, the powers of the PA were significantly reduced while consecutive Israeli governments continued to construct more settlements and dramatically expand others. This led the chairman of the PA, Mahmoud Abbas, to state that the PA was an “authority without authority”. Warnings of possible PA collapse have influenced the United States and the International Quartet to support the Authority, and to resume peace negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Secretary of State John Kerry’s efforts to renew peace talks, an initiative that was supported by President Barack Obama, was suspended



in April 2014 after nine months of negotiations. This was followed by a historic Palestinian unity government, announced on 2 June 2014, between the Palestinian rival factions Fateh and Hamas, after seven years of bitter division.

1.1. Research objectives

This research endeavors to respond to questions by Palestinian citizens and researchers about the future of the PA after two decades of its establishment, especially with the present warnings to dissolve it as a desperate step to protest against Israeli and the United States policy towards the Palestinian cause. It analyses the Oslo Agreement, which led to the establishment of the PA, and examines the political behavior of the PA. This research also looks at different scenarios for the future of the PA, the possible eruption of a Palestinian Intifada (uprising) and the repercussions of returning to all forms of resistance against the occupation forces, and the possibility of perpetuating the status quo and turning the PA into a mechanism to prolong the occupation.

1.2. The importance of the research

The PA is in a financial and political crisis, particularly after the change of Palestinian status from occupied Palestinian territories to an observer state, recognised by the UN General Assembly on the territories occupied in 1967. The PA will remain functioning in Gaza and the West Bank until the aspirations for a viable Palestinian State become a reality. However, with the crises befalling the PA, other options are looming. The chairman of the PA threatened to dissolve it, and this threat is becoming all the more serious with changes taking place on the ground by building more settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, which may lead to a Palestinian uprising. Nevertheless, the leadership of the PA may not take such a drastic step as efforts have been made by the International Quartet for Peace to resume direct negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians. The changing position of the US on Palestine is also something to be considered.

1.3. Research methodology

This research uses a descriptive approach in the study of the status quo of the PA as a political paradigm, through

the collection and analysis of necessary information and compares it with circumstances and political variables on the ground. This research depends on observation through daily monitoring of the reality of the political situation to develop appropriate assumptions and analyses. This is in addition to the analytical method in many academic articles considering the political behavior of the leadership of the PA as a political phenomenon.

2. OSLO AGREEMENT

Any comprehensive understanding of the Oslo Agreement signed in 1993 and its objectives requires analysis of its texts, which are mostly vague with regard to Palestinian rights, while accurate and clear on the Israeli issues, particularly regarding security. This agreement is compatible with the official Israeli approach and reflects the true intention of the Israel government (Shahak, 1993). Yossi Beilin¹ said that the motive behind the secret talks in Oslo with the PLO was to stop the Intifada and to establish joint security and economic projects (Kimmerling, 1997).

During the transitional period, the PA was to function in Gaza and the West Bank, dealing with social and economic matters and issues of law and order. The Palestinian security forces were to be responsible for maintaining security and public order for the Palestinians in the self-ruled areas, while the security of Israeli settlements and the borders would remain in the hands of the Israelis (Dajani, 1994). Therefore, the Israeli military forces withdrew from most densely populated areas in the occupied Palestinian territories while maintaining indirect control on them and without giving up the security responsibilities in these areas. For the Israelis, one of the advantages of the Oslo Agreement was the transfer of power to the Palestinians on a gradual basis, keeping security matters in Israeli hands and giving the Israeli government ample opportunity to ensure the security and safety of its citizens.

Despite the complexities of the Oslo Agreement and the erosion of its legitimacy due to the lack of implementation of its provisions, many Palestinians believed that the agreement would lead to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, though this issue was postponed for further consideration until the final stage of negotiations. However, the Palestinians were disappointed because of the failure of the Israeli governments to fulfil their promises. Ahmad Khalidi, adviser to the Palestinian negotiation team, listed possible outcomes of the Oslo Agreement as

¹ Yossi Beilin is a left-wing Israeli politician and has served as Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister and Justice Minister. He is best known for his involvement with the Oslo Agreement and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process in general.



follows: the probability of establishing an independent Palestinian state, the probability of full Palestinian control over the land under their control during the transitional period, and the possibility of failure to reach a common understanding between the two sides and reaching a stalemate in the peace process (Albasoos, 2005).

3. THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY

The political and military leadership of the PLO formed the basic infrastructure of the PA and its security forces (Abu-Libdeh, 2002). The PA began working through its institutions as an autonomous authority in Gaza and Jericho City in 1994, after the signing of the Cairo Agreement. Administrative authorities were transferred to this Authority in most of the West Bank cities, in accordance with the Second Oslo Agreement in 1995, to develop an administrative system and to deliver public services to the Palestinian people, especially in the areas of health, education and the judiciary (Frisch & Hofnung, 1997). The peace agreements allowed the PA to assume management responsibility for the areas under its control. However, this authority tried to appear as a state to a large extent.

For financial support the PA depends on the contributions made by the international community, including aid from the European Union and the United States. Thus, the salaries of the Palestinian police, security forces and civilian bureaucracy constituted a heavy burden on the income of the PA, especially on the aid provided by the donors. It is clear that the PA could not cover the salaries of non-productive sectors, such as security, which accounted for approximately 50% of its budget, even though it does not need this high number of members of the security forces to facilitate the economic and social life of the Palestinian people due to the absence of this development and the lack of security and public order. Thus, the Palestinian security forces emerged as a new player in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Luft, 2002).

This situation gave rise to an academic debate over the PA as an exceptional body, where its institutions are components of a state. However, it derives its real power from its relationship with the Israeli government, where power was obtained through a political settlement. That is, the PA was entrusted with the responsibility of establishing state institutions on the basis of agreements signed with the Israelis. Therefore, the PA did not reflect the ambition and desire to be the nucleus of a Palestinian state, but the secret peace agreements aimed at transforming the Palestinian armed resistance into a political power bound by international commitments.

In addition, one of the undeclared goals for the formation of the PA was to remove the image of the Israeli

government as an occupying authority and place the responsibilities and burdens on the PA. This lacked credibility because of its establishment by the PLO, which recognised Israel and opted for a peaceful settlement with it. The Authority has become a prison for Palestinians and a cemetery for their national aspirations, and has been bound by the obligations and conditions that prevented it from being a national Authority. However, the Palestinian people want an authority to reflect their national liberation movement, establish an independent Palestinian state and preserve Palestinian rights in conjunction with international legitimacy (Abrash, 2012).

The PA was formed and became a reality although it was a result of unjust peace agreements with Israel. Currently, this Authority is made up of ministries and departments employing over 150,000 civilian and military personnel in Gaza and the West Bank, and has security, legal and political commitments towards the Palestinian people. The PA has signed several agreements with other countries in political, economic, academic and administrative aspects. It consists of three authorities; legislative, executive and judicial (Abrash, 2012).

The al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000 increased Palestinians' support for the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), which was trying to strengthen social order and family structure in the Palestinian self-ruled areas. Hamas achieved victory in the Palestinian general election in 2006 and acquired 60.6% of the seats in the Legislative Council. This election was the first to involve all political factions and Palestinian intellectuals, except those of the Islamic Jihad movement (Middle East Centre for Research, 2006). Hamas established the tenth Palestinian Government in 2006 and created a distinct social service programme and disciplinary within its ranks. However, the United States and Israel opposed this government and refused to deal with it.

Clashes broke out between Hamas and the Fatah movement, especially with those involved in the security forces refusing to deal with the new Hamas-led government. Confrontation and armed clashes led, on 14 June 2007, to Hamas taking over the entire Gaza Strip. Consequently, the chairman of the PA dismissed the government, which still operates as a caretaker government, while another government was established in the West Bank, which is still working without the confidence of the Legislative Council.

The Israeli aggressions in Gaza in 2008 and 2012 further increased the popularity of Hamas because of its strategy of resisting the occupation and because of the influence of Islamic culture on Palestinian society, particularly in light of the failure of nationalist and left-wing parties to reconstruct social order. Thus, Hamas gained major credibility, particularly because it does not acknowledge the Oslo Agreement, and does not have political or security



collaboration with the Israeli government. Hamas has established security forces in Gaza to protect the Palestinian people from Israeli invasions and attacks, while continuing to deliver public services to the local community. Meanwhile, the security forces under the PA in the West Bank continue their coordination with the Israeli military forces. Nicola Nasser (2009) stated that there is national coordination between the government and the resistance factions in Gaza, while contradiction and conflict continue between the Authority and the Palestinian resistance factions in the West Bank. This has led to an ongoing campaign of arrest of members of resistance factions in the West Bank in collaboration with the Israeli military forces.

The PA adopted reform measures, but have remained within a theoretical structure. The Palestinians have not achieved security and have not achieved their hopes in the presence of this Authority. Any progress in the peace process was based on delivering more stability and willingness to maintain Israeli security. This consequently has eroded the legitimacy of the PA. In the meantime, the current deadlock in the negotiation process between the Israelis and the Palestinians has also raised questions about the feasibility of the continued functioning of the Authority.

4. THE FUTURE SCENARIOS OF THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY

The Israeli-Palestinian peace agreements proved to be insufficient to protect the Palestinians. Israel was able to buy more time in order to get more Palestinian land for the purpose of building settlements. This seemed to be done under the influence of the peace process conditions, which was an important element in the Israeli strategy of expanding Israeli settlements and imposing indirect control over the Palestinians (Aruri, 2001). It has been demonstrated that the Oslo Agreement is the problem, not the solution. This inequitable situation led to complete Palestinian dissatisfaction and frustration with the peace process, where more Israeli settlements were constructed instead of a peaceful conciliation, along with more bypass roads around the cities of the West Bank and Jerusalem, and more land confiscation and house demolitions by the Israeli forces.

These agreements resulted in a deteriorated economy, unemployment and instability in Gaza and the West Bank (Bishara, 2002). Despite the Israeli promises and pledges to the Palestinians, the number of Israeli settlements doubled during the era of the PA. Israel used segregation against the Palestinians in the West Bank, through the construction of the Apartheid Wall, which cuts into large chunks of Palestinian land and adds them to the Israeli side.

The Israeli government's recognition of the PA may be interpreted as the submission of this Authority to the terms

and conditions of the Israelis, or it might be interpreted as international recognition of the fact that the occupied Palestinian territories are not part of Israel, and that the PA will be transformed into a state (Nasser, 2009). Therefore the dissolution of this Authority may involve the loss of international recognition, which is a loss that is no less important than the international recognition of Palestinian existence. This fact coincides with the calls of some Palestinian politicians to dissolve the Authority as a way to get rid of the conditions and dictates of the Israeli government (Rasheed, 2011).

Threats to dissolve the PA have taken an official form by the leaders of the Authority, including its Chairman, Mahmoud Abbas. This came as a response to negotiations reaching a deadlock in addition to the United States' policy of not forcing Israel to stop settlement building. The U.S. Administration went even further and confirmed that the optimal solution for both sides was direct negotiations. This is in addition to the statement made by the chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat, confirmed by the Israeli newspaper *Maariv*, that the PA had informed some countries, including Israel and the United States, about its intention to disband in 2012 and gradually transfer its powers to the Israeli government, starting with civil areas such as health, education and agriculture, postponing security to a later stage (Rasheed, 2011). The calls and claims to dissolve the PA began increasing after the deadlock of the negotiation process, which lasted nearly two decades, between the Israeli government and the Palestinians. Such an approach holds Israel fully and directly responsible for controlling the lives of the Palestinians under occupation, in the absence of a Palestinian national authority, against the Israeli army (Abu-Seda, 2011).

Israeli media talked about a detailed plan submitted by the Palestinian leadership to dissolve the PA, something that was denied by the Authority, confirming that these were just rumours to confuse the Palestinians and an attempt to prove that the PA leaders were unqualified to lead the Palestinian people to achieve a Palestinian state (Abu-Seda, 2011). Despite denials by Palestinian officials of any intention to dissolve it, confirming that it was the nucleus for a future independent Palestinian state, some Palestinian elites are carefully examining the future of the entire PA. In 2011, Palestinian news agencies affirmed that the PA Chairman had formed a committee from the PLO and central Fatah movement to construct the "New Palestinian Strategy", which considers the shape and future of the relationship with Israel and the future of the PA, taking into account local, regional and international variables (El-Saleh, 2011). A senior Palestinian official told the *Middle East* newspaper that the Chairman of the PA had sent letters to the Israeli government and the U.S. Administration talking about the possibility of dissolving the PA. This was confirmed by a source in the Central Committee of the Fatah movement (Ma'an News Agency, 28/10/2011). This meant that the PA would no longer exist, thus obliging the Israeli government to carry out its responsibilities



in the occupied Palestinian territories. This led to a situation of great uncertainty among Palestinians.

Later, Mahmoud Al-Aloul, a member of the Central Committee of the Fatah movement, revealed to the Ma'an News Agency (04/11/2011) that the PA was not to be dissolved, but the statements made by some officials were to describe the hard conditions of the PA, and to restore its sovereignty and express dissatisfaction with the status quo. The PA is connected with Israel in terms of major political, economic and security matters though Israel is the main beneficiary of these relationships, especially concerning security. Al-Aloul confirmed that the Authority would not accept remaining powerless, but would not be dissolved even if it was going through a very difficult situation. In this respect, Mr. Azzam al-Ahmad, Head of the Fatah Parliamentarian block and a close aide to the PA Chairman, assured the *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* newspaper that no decision had been made to dissolve the PA, but it would break down as a result of the failure of the peace process and due to the continuation of Israeli occupation of Palestinian land (Awad, 2011).

The Chairman of the PA, Mahmoud Abbas, confirmed in 2011 before going to the UN to seek a Palestinian State, that Palestinian membership in the UN did not contradict the negotiation process (Ma'an News Agency, 04/11/2011). This declaration from Abbas was matched by the move of the International Quartet to resume the peace process between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Meetings with representatives of the International Quartet meant to put pressure on the PA leadership to resume the negotiations without a prospective image of the final solution and without dealing with Palestinian demands (Al-Masri, 2011).

The behaviour of the PA leadership motivated the writer Hani Al-Masri to describe it as "schizophrenic". This is due to the differences between the declarations of its leaders about its breakdown, possible dissolution, and having a plan for a gradual handover to the Israeli government, starting with health, education and services in general and ending with security, while most Palestinian leaders refuse to dissolve or hand over the PA to Israel. This shows the extent of contradictions among Palestinian official declarations and reflects a real crisis and strong disagreement among the PA leaders (Al-Masri, 2011). These unstable declarations and contradictory political behaviour concerning critical Palestinian issues means the PA is in a real crisis situation and there is no national strategy to discuss other options to replace negotiations with Israel. It also reflects a loss of hope for a practical mechanism to realise the Palestinian state, which was recognised as an observer state in November 2012 by the UN. This means failure and absence of new strategic options for the future of the PA, which is why leaders of the PA are sending paradoxical messages including the threat to dissolve it.

4.1. Dissolving the PA

In an interview with the Jordanian *Al-Ray* newspaper (2010), unstructured comments made by the Chairman of the PA stated that "the PA made the Israeli occupation the cheapest occupation in history". This declaration raises questions concerning the seriousness of the continuation of an Authority which serves the occupation and acts on its behalf. Meanwhile, some Palestinians demand its dissolution, especially as some Palestinian leaders misrepresented the Authority for their personal interest; other beneficiary leaders considered the PA as a personal enterprise to make a profit. Subsequently, while the Palestinians are facing political and economic crises, some of their leaders have been financially benefiting from this situation (Abrash, 2012).

Add to this the prevalent belief of the Israeli government that the PA should follow Israeli instructions. Otherwise its leaders would be replaced by whoever accepts the role of an Israeli government agent. The Israeli government believes that the characteristics of a good Palestinian authority are those which accept the presence of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Jerusalem, engage in negotiations with the Israelis without guarantees to establish an independent Palestinian state, and give up the Palestinian Right of Return (*Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 2011). Therefore, the Palestinian leadership is living in a vicious circle set up by the Israelis.

The ideological attitude of the head of Israeli government does not allow a final and permanent solution to the conflict, and the United States' role continues in the same rhythm without any attempt to put pressure on Israel to end the occupation and establish a Palestinian State. Based on this description, the PA will not be able to build its institutions as the caretaker of the occupation, at the time when it requires changes in its political strategy to preserve Palestinian rights. This situation will lead to a confrontation with the Israeli occupation, which may lead to a breakdown in the PA institutions.

There is a difference between desperately dissolving the PA and changing its functions and commitments and eventually breaking down while confronting and resisting the Israeli occupation. This political situation encouraged many Palestinian politicians and political analysts to study the future of the PA, and the possibility of dissolving it, leaving the stage of the Palestinian resistance factions to forcefully confront the Israeli occupation forces. This situation may rebalance the Palestinian case and restore its self-respect. In the meantime, the Israeli government would carry the whole economic, political and security responsibilities as occupiers in the Palestinian territories. Fayez Rasheed (2011) called for dissolving the PA. He holds that this is not an authority because Israel wanted it as a proxy to implement its policies in the occupied territories without holding any sovereignty.



Israel just wants the PA as a replacement for the occupation, to maintain security and prevent attacks against Israel. Meanwhile, the PA should fulfil Israeli dictates. Rasheed thinks that the PA has implemented all these duties and continues to do so under the name of the Palestinian National Authority. There were strong hopes that the Chairman of the PA would dissolve it as a reply to US and Israeli attitudes in rejecting peace and supporting Israeli settlement building. This hope is still there because the Palestinian people have gained nothing from the peace process except more Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Judaizing the City of Jerusalem.

Dissolving the PA means the end of the peace process, which was a deceptive process for Palestinians, with Israel, with the support of the United States, masquerading direct occupation by creating the PA to carry out the required responsibilities. Accordingly, dissolving the PA is a major step, which means other Palestinian options would be in place, essentially resistance in all its forms (*Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 2011). Strong justifications for such demands have been made by many Palestinians who believe that the PA replaced the Israeli occupation, and thus dissolving it means the return to the PLO after careful national construction to include all Palestinian parties in order to develop a political programme, approved by all factions, to serve the Palestinian interests. Dissolving the PA would force Israel to carry out its responsibilities in accordance with international law to satisfy the most basic needs of Palestinians to live as respectful humans in the occupied Palestinian territories (Brown, 2007).

4.2. Perpetuating the PA

Practical experience in the Palestinian self-ruled areas proves that the Israeli government is still managing the political scene and controlling the Palestinian people, primarily in the West Bank, more easily and cheaply, by using the PA to implement security protocols. Therefore, it is difficult for the PA Chairman or the Palestinian leadership to dissolve it. This is due to many complex reasons. A decision to dissolve the PA means breaking up its institutions and its various ministries and security forces. It means halting the financial aid from donor countries for the Authority, which has more than 150,000 Palestinian employees. It also implies a potential lack of communication between Gaza and the West Bank, and control of the Palestinian border crossings by the occupation forces. Dissolving the PA may lead to a state of lawlessness, especially after the demise of the security forces. There are also many PA institutions, such as hospitals, schools and civil bodies, which would be left with an unknown fate (Rasheed, 2011). There are commitments and connections between the PA and other countries that are hard to suspend. These facts raise many

questions about the political and economic alternatives to the PA. Therefore things are highly complex in terms of this idea.

Dissolving the PA means full Israeli control over the lives of Palestinians. It is believed that this proposal is theoretical, but if implemented it would have far-reaching consequences. Moshe Marzouk, Israeli adviser on Arab affairs, believes that the dissolution of the PA would be a “severe punishment for Israel”. It means the Israeli authorities should return to full security control of the West Bank and take responsibility for education, health and other matters. Such a situation would have serious international consequences, especially as Israel is now experiencing international political isolation. The PA’s dissolution is the last desperate step, which means abandoning its achievements of the last two decades. It is believed that the international community will not allow that to happen, and therefore the threat does not seem realistic (Magnezi, 2011).

Besides, senior PA officials have a personal interest in its survival. They have greatly benefitted from the existence of the PA, and some leaders who have become “political brokers” are concerned about the continuation of the PA. Some have set up companies and enjoy powerful political and social status (Rasheed, 2011). Israel, the United States, and western countries are concerned about the endurance of the PA. Even though the United States and many European countries face financial deficit, and despite the stalemate in the negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians, they are keen to financially support the PA and provide its security forces with logistic means, in preparation for facing massive demonstrations from frustrated civilians. This support includes tear gas, rubber bullets, stun grenades and gas masks. Therefore, Israel and the United States are aware of the real position of the PA Chairman and his choice to stick to peace negotiations and perpetuate the PA (Rasheed, 2011).

The continuation of the PA is indispensable to a two-state solution. Hence, Palestinian leaders help to prevent its collapse. Peace negotiations may lead to upgrading the PA status or expanding the scope of its activities (Yaari & Brown, 2012). The UN General Assembly’s recognition of Palestine as an observer state at the UN on 29 November 2012 improves the Palestinian chance to put this matter into practice with the support of the international community, meanwhile the PA will continue functioning in Gaza and the West Bank. This is because the PA cannot use the name *State of Palestine* in its official documents, despite the fact that the UN changed the name of the delegation from *Palestine* to *State of Palestine*, in December 2012 (Associated Press, 2013). The PA will always be the essence of a Palestinian state. Those who criticised its establishment did so either because they doubted the two-state solution or because they believed that the PA itself would lead only to an internal autonomy rather than a fully-fledged state.



The PA made the headlines at the end of 2011 and 2012 by making significant political moves to acquire international support and achieve statehood. Although the PA statehood bid at the United Nations was not successful in November 2011, Palestinians were able to celebrate a victory after their bid to join the UN as an observer state was passed by a majority in November 2012. Ultimately, the PA has become a prominent player on the international scene, turning to international organisations for statehood recognition. However, claims that the Authority is ready to form a state may be premature, given the economic and political crisis. The PA relies heavily on foreign aid, while Israel and the United States have chosen to delay the transfer of funds to the PA in response to the UN bid. Consequently, the PA may need to reconsider its tactics for statehood as the UN approval of the Palestinian State would be little more than a symbolic gesture (*The Layalina Chronicle*, 2013).

Two decades after the Oslo Agreement, nothing appears to be capable of changing the Israeli-Palestinian status quo. Perpetuating the situation is certainly not a preferable outcome for the Palestinians, but is something for which regional and international powers have shown support (Sayigh, 2013a). The negotiations between the two sides reached its peak in 1999 and then a deadlock due to the Israeli intransigence and the inability of the international community to put more pressure on Israel (Ma'an News Agency, 04/11/2011). However, negotiations resumed after the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, visited the region in 2013 and met the PA Chairman, Mahmoud Abbas, and the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, in an attempt to revive faltering Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. The diplomatic activities and the prospect of reaching a breakthrough in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, possibly as early as the beginning of 2014, had failed by the end of the nine-month timetable set by Kerry in spring 2013 to reach a final status agreement (Sayigh, 2013b).

Attempts at building national unity by Palestinian political factions, the leading force in the Palestinian political system, resulted, in June 2014, in the formation of a Palestinian unity government after seven years of division. This government is backed by the UN, the EU, and the US. Meanwhile, several Israeli ministers lashed out at Washington over its decision to work with the new Palestinian unity government which is backed by the Islamist movement Hamas (Ma'an News Agency, 03/06/2014). The Palestinian political factions signed the reconciliation agreement and established a technocrat government representing national unity, to be followed by presidential and parliamentary elections within six months. This means the continuation of the PA and its institutions, the chairman, legislative council and municipal councils.

5. CONCLUSION

With an unequal balance of power, and far from the basis of international legitimacy and justice, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process resulted in an Israeli apartheid regime. The Israeli government succeeded in persuading the PLO, politically and financially, to engage in a direct bilateral relationship, where Israel has the upper hand. The Oslo Agreement turned the Palestinian dream into a nightmare and turned the direct Israeli military occupation into indirect control of the Palestinians through commitments on the part of the Palestinian security forces, so that the Israeli security strategy remains the primary consideration in any peace settlement. Therefore, Palestinian political leadership should take the initiative to configure a comprehensive political programme and to disengage itself from bilateral negotiations with the Israelis. It is believed that any Israeli decision to resume negotiations with the Palestinians would be a mechanism to gain more time to impose Israeli policies on the ground and to build more settlements, so any solution would consequently reach a dead end. This has been evident during the past two decades.

The PA was the alternative to the PLO, which has had its institutions marginalised to give effect and to strengthen the institutions of the PA. Therefore, the debate about the future of the PA requires the implementation of a Palestinian national strategy and reforming the PLO with all its institutions, as well as suspending all forms of negotiations with Israel. Moreover, confidence must be granted to the Palestinian resistance in addition to boycotting Israel in political, economic and security matters, returning the Palestinian case to its Arab and Islamic orientation rather than relying on the International Quartet, which is subjected to United States and Israeli conditions. In addition, international legitimacy should be restored to the Palestinian cause and the relevant United Nations Resolutions must be applied, particularly regarding the Right of Return for refugees.

The PA represents the Palestinian people, is not part of Israel and does not belong to the Palestinian political leadership. Since the preservation of the PA and its continued survival is no longer a transitional arrangement connected with the peace process, the Palestinian leadership should withdraw from the role of collaboration with the Israeli forces, leaving them in confrontation with the Palestinian resistance factions. However, those who threaten to dissolve the PA must possess an alternative programme based on resisting the occupation forces and adopting more diplomatic measures based on international legitimacy, in order to compel Israel to recognise Palestinian national rights. ■



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