

COMMENTARY

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After Fifty Years of Occupation, What's Next:

An Open letter to President Mahmoud Abbas

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Dear President Abbas,
Last week I sent an open letter to Prime Minister Netanyahu, criticizing him in the strongest terms for pursuing policies that prolong the occupation of the West Bank rather than searching for ways to end it by resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict based on a two-state solution. I must hasten to say, however, that you, along with Hamas' leaders, have contributed your own share to the continuation of the occupation that has deepened the plight of the Palestinian people.

I have always and continue to oppose the occupation, and place the blame largely on right-wing Israeli governments for maintaining it under the pretext of national security concerns. Given that Israel is by far the stronger party, it could have taken significant steps toward peace while tightly guarding its national security. That said, to simply blame the Israeli government alone for obstructing the peace process may be comforting to you, but unless you change your approach and strategy toward Israel, you will further prolong the occupation.

The fact that much of the international community supports your cause is not enough. Your current policies are playing into the hands of the extremely powerful right-wing Israeli constituency, which effectively uses your actions and public narratives to justify their opposition to ending the occupation. Thus, you are weakening the hands of the Israeli political left and centre, who are key to negotiating a peace agreement and ending the occupation, as only they can change the public sentiment in favour of a two-state solution, provided you earn their support and trust.

To that end, you need to develop a new strategy that you or your successor must pursue to change the dynamic of the conflict for the better, by developing a non-confrontational policy, engaging in constructive public narratives, ending all forms of incitement, pursuing political reconciliation with Hamas, reining in corruption, focusing on public development projects, and introducing an unbiased curriculum in schools. Finally, do not instinctively reject the Israelis' complaints and concerns about the Palestinians' behaviour; instead, listen carefully and adopt the strategy that will disabuse a growing number of Israelis of their pre-conceived notions about what the Palestinians' true intent is. Do not miss yet another opportunity, because the longer the conflict and the occupation continue, the less favourable outcome you will be compelled to accept.

Although the PLO adopted in 1993 the Oslo Accords—a non-violent approach to solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—violence in various degrees against the Israelis remained a major factor that inhibited the emergence of a powerful Israeli political party (or combination of parties) to challenge the right-wing constituency on the occupation. The second Intifada in 2000 that resulted in the deaths of over 1,000 Israelis left an indelible mark on just about every Israeli and deepened their distrust of the Palestinians, which has not been alleviated to this day.

The continuing sporadic but persistent violence, the three Hamas-instigated wars against Israel and its continued advocacy of Israel's destruction and the praising of martyrdom provide constant concerns about the Palestinians' ultimate intentions. Due to those concerns, nearly half of the Israeli population believes that the Palestinians are nowhere near accepting Israel's right to exist as a sovereign nation—a belief that right-wing parties use effectively to make a convincing argument against the establishment of a Palestinian state.

What you have failed to do, Abbas, is engage in a constructive public narrative that reiterates time and again the reality of Israel's existence, and that no amount of violence against Israel will bring the country to heel. In fact, the opposite is true. The more persistent the violence is, the further away you are from ending the occupation, because successive right-wing Israeli governments have masterfully linked the continuing occupation to preserving Israel's national security.

To change this discourse, you must take all the necessary steps to end any form of incitement. The violent 2015 uprising (the so-called "Knife Intifada") was fuelled in part by incitement via social media campaigns—propelled by Hamas, Islamist groups, and frustrated individuals—that glorified either those who committed violent crimes or those "martyred" in the cause of Palestinian resistance. Crude cartoons shared on Facebook underscored the ease in which an innocent Palestinian youth could become a martyr, with captions such as "This is not difficult. To the closest kitchen, and go in the name of God."

During the uprising in 2015, you voiced full support for the so-called martyrs, stating that “We welcome every drop of blood spilled in Jerusalem.” It is tragic that you and many other Palestinian officials defend the use of “martyrdom” language when killing innocent Israeli civilians, many of whom want to end the occupation. In an interview on Israeli television Channel 2 in April 2016, however, you changed your tone when you said, “In one school, we found 70 boys and girls who were carrying knives. We took the knives and spoke to them and said: ‘This is a mistake. We do not want you to kill and be killed...’”

But then, in a sign of official endorsement, the village of Surda-Abu Qash in early 2016 named a park after Muhannad Halabi, a 19-year who was killed by Israeli police following a stabbing attack against Israeli civilians. Your public support of such occurrences only encourages more violence. It is time for you to be honest with your own public by ending your damaging narrative. The young and impressionable would rather embrace the ‘glory’ of martyrdom than listen to your half-hearted, occasional pleas to abandon violence. Meanwhile, you are undermining your position in the eyes of Israelis as you are portraying yourself as a double-talker and a weak leader who is not in control.

It is true that Hamas has and continues to be a major obstacle to peace and a staunch rival to your authority. Given, however, that Hamas must be an integral part of any peace accord with Israel, you should speak publicly and repeatedly about the need for Palestinian political cohesiveness as a prerequisite to reaching a peace agreement with Israel. Yet, your personal rivalry and ego always stands in the way.

In a recent meeting with Arab ambassadors, you said “I will take unprecedented steps against Hamas since it halted the [Fatah-Hamas] reconciliation. The measures will be painful if the movement does not take back its actions.” Instead, you should mobilize the Arab states, especially Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Qatar, to persuade and/or pressure Hamas to accept the Arab Peace Initiative so that it will be in line with the rest of the Arab states in relation to a peace agreement with Israel.

To be sure, Abbas, your political legitimacy has been and will continue to be a problem for you as well as for Hamas. The Palestinian parliament (which had limited oversight powers) has been defunct since Hamas overtook Gaza in 2007, and both of you rule by decree.

Given this sad reality, why do you expect Israel to simply overlook your precarious political situation? Those Israelis who oppose the rise of Palestinian statehood regularly point to your thin political base and disarray, and have convinced much of the Israeli public that you are not and will not be a partner that can forge an enduring peace agreement.

Another major problem that impedes real progress toward peace is the pervasive corruption throughout your government strata. A 2016 poll of Palestinians revealed that 95.5 per cent of respondents “believe there is corruption in [your] government.” Among Gazan residents, the percentage is slightly lower, but still stands at 82 per cent.

You have enforced the perception of rampant corruption by allowing, for example, the Palestinian Authority’s development budget to earmark \$9.4 million for your presidential plane and \$4.4 million of undefined “other” expenses. Corruption also exists within your own circle of advisors and party elites, who are given hefty salaries and awarded with positions and various other perks—tens of millions of dollars end up in foreign banks. The European Union noted that overall corruption in the Palestinian Authority resulted in the “loss” of approximately €2 billion in aid funds.

Imagine, Abbas—if these funds were invested in sustainable development projects and infrastructure, how much would the public have benefited in terms of job opportunities, self-empowerment, education, and overall progress? In this respect, Hamas fares even worse as they have and continue to invest hundreds of millions of dollars into building tunnels and buying and manufacturing weapons, instead of building housing, clinics, schools, roads, sewage systems, and electric grids to bring an end to the Palestinians’ pain and suffering.

Sadly, many Palestinian leaders are still focused on destroying Israel rather than building their own nation, arguing that focusing on development and building infrastructure and civilian institutions is tantamount to acceptance of the status quo. *They are dead wrong.* It is the very building of state structures and a thriving society that you do not want to be destroyed that will indirectly give Israel the confidence that you want an enduring peace.

In contrast to Israel, which became a global power and one of the most advanced nations in the world, the Palestinians remain an underdeveloped entity. Instead of building a promising future for generations to come by accepting the reality of Israel and learning to compete constructively, Palestinian school curricula includes indoctrination and preparation for the next violent conflict, portraying every Israeli as a soldier ready to kill and destroy.

What further strengthens the Israeli argument that the Palestinians will never accept Israel under any boundary is that schools use maps that do not detail Israel’s internationally-defined borders along the 1967 borders—which you accept. Your Education Minister Sabri Saidam noted that “I will only stick to the map that the Palestinians desire.” The presence of maps that do not delineate Israel’s existence in textbooks has “ripple effects” as it further prolongs the conflict in the hope of recovering the whole land. For instance, a question seeking the “surface area of

Palestine” was marked true for the answer 27,027 square kilometres, which would include all of present-day Israel.

A recent survey of Palestinian textbooks found an exercise in a fourth grade book that “invites the children to write about a Palestinian martyr of their choice.” In defence of using the word “martyrs,” your minister Saidam said “One man’s hero is another man’s terrorist.” He has rejected attempts by UNRWA to bring the Palestinian curriculum up to UN standards, stating “As education minister, it’s my responsibility to safeguard the Palestinian narrative.” The fact that you accept your minister’s position on this critically sensitive issue suggests that you are just as culpable as he is, but it is *you who must shoulder the ultimate responsibility*.

I personally *do believe that you want to settle the conflict with Israel based on a two-state solution*. But if you put yourself, Abbas, in the shoes of an Israeli who is looking at what is being said, done, claimed, promoted, preached in mosques, and taught in schools, how would you feel? This is what you are confronted with. Your statement in support of a two-state solution sounds hollow and insincere, regardless of your true intentions.

Abbas, you must realize that the resumption of peace negotiations under the present circumstances is futile and will lead nowhere. You must start by changing your public narrative and being honest with your public that the policy of confrontation has failed. A new strategy is needed to enlist the centre and left of Israel’s political spectrum in support of a two-state solution, while disabusing many Israelis who feed off the conflict to justify their recalcitrant opposition to ending the occupation.

You can put the Netanyahu government on the defensive by demanding first a process of reconciliation—people-to-people measures, for at least two years—to mitigate the deep distrust and allay concerns over security. You must make it abundantly clear that the Palestinians seek a state based on the 1967 borders, are open to territorial exchanges, and have no territorial ambitions beyond that.

You must start by condemning in the strongest terms any act of terror and violence, ending incitement in any form, and disabusing your public of the notion that Israel will someday disappear. You should ask for joint activities between Israeli and Palestinian youth in sports, art, and theatre, and seek tourism in both directions. A strategy of reconciliation is necessary to pave the way for constructive peace talks.

This strategy will weaken the staunch right-wing Israeli parties who are possessed by the illusion that they can have it all, while strengthening the hands of the Israeli left and centre who support

the creation of a Palestinian state. They will be in a much stronger position to raise their voices and rally behind ending the occupation without being called traitors.

I am known for calling on ending the occupation in any form, but I am also known to call it as I see it. This, Abbas, is what you are confronted with. You must now use the argument of the hardcore Israelis who support the occupation against them. By adopting this new strategy, you will not only disarm them in droves, but you will also motivate a multitude of Israelis to rally behind the cause of ending the occupation.

Note: This article was originally published in the web portal of Prof. Ben-Meir and has been reproduced under arrangement. Web Link: <http://alonben-meir.com/writing/fifty-years-occupation-whats-next-open-letter-president-mahmoud-abbas/>

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