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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

Palestinian Popular Defiance of the Occupation: Prospects for a Turning Point

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Oct 2015

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Introduction

Compounding the deadlock that has paralyzed Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, Israeli desecration of Muslim religious sites in Jerusalem have given rise to popular rage amongst the Palestinian people. This evolving situation presents the possibility of a further rebellion of the Palestinians in the West Bank, where a third Palestinian *Intifada* is increasingly likely.

Attacks by Israeli settlers and the military have increased in both scope and intensity over the preceding few months, affecting a greater proportion of the Palestinian people. These have also coincided with a set of Israeli measures that seek to penalize any possible Palestinian retaliation to such attacks. Meanwhile, the Palestinian National Authority has limited itself to empty slogans and unfulfilled commitments, a situation exacerbated by growing disenchantment with PNA President Mahmoud Abbas. In particular, Abbas' speech at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) disappointed the Palestinian public by failing to meet expectations that it would include radical anti-occupation policies — expectations fed by the PNA trumpeting the speech in advance as a “bombshell”.

Reasons and Motives

A number of factors converged to form a state of heightened Palestinian public disenchantment with the status quo, leading to the latest escalation in confrontations with the Israeli occupation.

Diminishing Prospects for a Political Solution: The realization of Palestinian national aspirations now seems increasingly unlikely. This is made worse by the ongoing rift between Fateh and Hamas, which remains unresolved despite the formation of a Palestinian unity government under the leadership of Rami Hamadallah in 2014. Equally, the options available to the PNA are severely constricted: in the midst of regional and global circumstances that limit the body's ability to challenge Israeli supremacy, the PNA remains unprepared to adopt any forms of struggle outside of the confines of the peace treaties it has signed with Israel.

The PNA did take some retaliatory measures against Israel following the collapse of efforts led by US Secretary of State John Kerry to re-start the peace process, through a framework agreement that aimed to end the occupation and usher in a Palestinian state

before 2017. In particular, these measures included formal Palestinian membership of the International Criminal Court (April, 2015), theoretically at least giving Palestinians the ability to bring charges against Israeli officials for war crimes committed in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Nonetheless, a decision by the Central Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization—the parent body of the PNA—to end security coordination with the Israeli occupation was discredited by the non-compliance of Abbas' Authority, whose security forces continue to liaise directly and openly with the Israelis across the West Bank. While the PNA may seek room to maneuver within the confines of the Oslo Accords, it has never fundamentally challenged the legitimacy of its peace agreements with Israel: when push comes to shove, the PNA has always played by the rules.

Given the crescendo of Israeli violence and attacks on Palestinian holy sites in Jerusalem, however, the public had expected more of President Abbas' address to the UNGA. Abbas failed to meet predictions by some observers that he would use the UNGA speech to announce an annulment of the Oslo Accords, or at the very least declare that security cooperation with the Israeli occupation would end. Not only did Abbas fail to meet these lofty expectations, his speech even concluded with a plea and supplication.

Abbas further alienated Palestinian public opinion by declaring his preparedness to return to the negotiating table and to accept a French proposal which would see the PNA reduced to a mere policeman, preventing clashes between Palestinians and the Israeli occupation forces along West Bank flashpoints. This would be in keeping with the behavior of the PNA under the leadership of Abbas who, on the eve of his UNGA speech, emphasized to European leaders that unabated Israeli attacks would push the Palestinians into a third *Intifada* the PNA "did not want", according to the Palestinian president. Later, Abbas confirmed the same sentiments during a visit to his residence by Isaac Herzog, leader of Israel's opposition.¹ This was spun by those Palestinian officials loyal to the PNA president as opposition to being drawn into a confrontation which the Palestinians did not want. Notwithstanding the occasional rhetorical flurry by Palestinian officials, the past actions of PNA president Mahmoud Abbas leave little doubt about the direction which the Authority as a whole will take.

The Savagery of Settlers in East Jerusalem and on the West Bank: Just as the prospects of a political, negotiated solution to the Palestinian situation dwindled,

¹ "Herzog Meets Abbas in Ramallah: A Third Intifada Must Be Prevented", Barak Ravid, *Haaretz* (English edition), August 18, 2015: <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/.premium-1.671782>

violence by Israeli settlers and their attacks on Palestinian towns and villages in the West Bank escalated. Data from the Palestinian News and Information Agency shows that there were no fewer than 282 settler attacks during the first eight months of 2015.² One such incident which stood out for its brutality was the arson attack on the Dawabshe family in the village of Douma on the outskirts of Nablus, which killed a toddler and his parents, leaving the only living member of the family, their four-year-old, still lying in a hospital bed suffering from massive burns to his small body. In addition to this and similar arson attacks, Israeli settlers have also attacked Palestinians in the West Bank through hit-and-run car attacks, stone throwing against Palestinian cars and other defacements of Palestinian property. All of these attacks have been carried out in an environment of complete impunity; in the case of the arson attack on the Dawabshe home, for example, the alleged suspects were released from Israeli detention within 24 hours of their arrest. By contrast, the Israeli authorities in the West Bank have had no problem in summarily executing several Palestinian activists, using the pretext that they were planning attacks on Israeli checkpoints. Some of the innocent Palestinian youths who have fallen victim to these extrajudicial executions include Dia Abdulhaleem, Hadeel Al Hamshaloun and Fadi Alloun.³

The Netanyahu cabinet has also worked to help, fund and encourage incursions by Israeli soldiers, settlers and extremist rabbis into the Aqsa Mosque compound, with 45 such incidents during July-September. One of the most significant attacks took place with the visit of Moshe Feiglin, Deputy Speaker of the Israeli Knesset, on September 14. Feiglin's visit was accompanied by heavy-handed Israeli tactics which destroyed the centuries-old windows and doors to the seventh century mosque. Such destructive actions will make legislative discussion of an imposed Jewish religious presence in the Al Aqsa compound by the Israeli Knesset a moot point: the "temporal and spatial" utilization of the mosque by Israeli settlers is now a fait accompli.

"Lone Wolf" Resistance Goes On: Given the present state of paralysis of the Palestinian political factions, and particularly within Jerusalem, acts of resistance by

² See *Al Jazeera Mubasher*, "In Numbers: 282 Settler Attacks in Eight Months" (link in Arabic): <http://mubasher.aljazeera.net/news/arabic-and-international/2015/10/201510574025687657.htm>

³ For Hadeel Al Hamshaloun, see "Evidence Indicates West Bank Killing was Extrajudicial Execution", Amnesty International, September 25, 2015: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde15/2529/2015/en/>

individual Palestinians acting out of a sense of patriotism and the urge to act have now become a vehicle for the expression of Palestinian national anger. To counter these, the Israeli government has adopted a number of punitive measures, including the possibility of Jerusalem residents losing their right to live in the city and the withdrawal of social benefits for the attackers and their families.⁴ In order to achieve these aims, the Israeli prime minister's office approved the expansion of the Israeli military presence in occupied East Jerusalem, in addition to the heightening of military preparedness within the occupied city. This included an additional 400 Israeli police officers and enhancement of their surveillance capabilities, following a deterioration of Israel's traditional intelligence-gathering efforts, which previously relied on information provided by Palestinian collaborators.⁵ Neither these Israeli measures, however, nor increased Palestinian security coordination with the occupation, have been able to put an end to Palestinian operations within the boundaries of Jerusalem. This is one of the most significant features of the latest round of Palestinian resistance; it lies outside of the control of the PNA, which is trying desperately to avert another full-scale Palestinian *Intifada*.

Inspired by the latest spate of lone wolf acts of rebellion within the municipal boundaries of Jerusalem, Palestinians in towns and cities across the West Bank have also taken up arms against Israeli settlers. In addition, there have been mass public protests at flashpoints outside of Israeli settlements. This phenomenon has been particularly pronounced in towns and cities which have a large settler presence on their outskirts: Ramallah, Nablus, Tulkarem and Jenin. In some cases, such as near the Bet El settlement on the outskirts of Ramallah, the PNA security forces have stood powerless to prevent confrontations, in places where only recently they would have worked to prevent these escalations. Notably, these popular protests in East Jerusalem

⁴ Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem are entitled to a greater set of social services and rights from the Israeli authorities than are other Palestinians on the West Bank. While these rights are often withdrawn arbitrarily, as residents whose homes were also annexed by Israel following the 1967 war, East Jerusalem Palestinians form a distinct group compared to Palestinians from the West Bank and carry separate ID cards. Previously, the destruction of Palestinian homes within the municipal boundaries of East Jerusalem was highly unusual.

⁵ These latest attacks pose serious challenges for Israel, which finds it difficult to apportion blame to the political leadership of the Palestinian political factions. Equally, collective punishment measures such as the demolition of the family homes of Palestinians who carry out the attacks—a common Israeli tactic—are viewed by many in the world community as a war crime, further isolating Israel.

and the West Bank have also been taken up by Palestinians living behind the “Green Line” (i.e., Israeli citizens), in towns such as Jaffa, Nazareth and Taybeh, who are equally incensed by attacks on Palestinian sites in Jerusalem.

In the Wake of Resistance: Reactions and the Future Path

While rhetoric from the PNA continues to play by its well established rules of a staid and overly conciliatory tone, the Israeli government has become increasingly ruthless in its efforts to crush Palestinian popular resistance. These include expedited procedures to demolish the family homes of Palestinians involved in resistance actions; the increase of military and police forces in Jerusalem; and the interrogation of bystanders, such as the Jerusalem shopkeepers questioned by Israeli authorities following the stabbing of two Israeli settlers by Muhanad Halabi in the Old City. For its part, the Executive Committee of the PLO has managed only to applaud PNA President Abbas’ efforts at continued security, political and economic cooperation with the Israeli occupation, and to end internal Palestinian discord.

Faced with mounting public despair and the potential for escalated anger, and met with intensified Israeli aggression as well as the complete failure of attempts at a negotiated settlement, it seems clear that the Palestinian political landscape will develop in one of three distinct outcomes:

1. In the event that the present wave of protest expands into a fully-fledged public uprising, the PNA will have to decide if it will continue to pursue its well-worn modus operandi of high-level security cooperation with Israel and an iron-fisted security response to its own people. This would be consistent with statements by numerous PNA officials, including PNA President Abbas. An alternative would be for the PNA to adopt the same approach as Yasser Arafat did during the Second Intifada of 2000; but such an outcome remains unlikely, given that the present PNA leadership is antithetical to the late President Arafat’s stance, which it regards to have resulted in disaster.
2. An increasingly punitive, repressive response from the PNA and its security forces in tandem with newly established modes of oppression by the Israeli occupation will be used to suffocate Palestinian resistance. It remains true, however, that the Palestinian youths presently rebelling against the Israeli occupation were born during the age of Oslo: their actions defy a present state of paralysis by Palestinian and broader Arab officialdom. Pacifying them remains unlikely.

3. Born of the present state of disunity within the Palestinian body politic, and the actions of the PNA in seeking to prevent the growth of a true grassroots and mass popular uprising, another possibility is the continuation and expansion of the present mode of individual-led acts of resistance. This would be the ultimate expression of Palestinian public disenchantment with the continued pursuit of a political settlement in parallel with escalated violent repression by the Israeli occupation.

In summation, the present state of affairs will not resolve itself, nor will Palestinian resistance simply wither away with time. The PNA has demonstrated its refusal to behave as a vehicle for national liberation, even as the Israeli policy of settlement expansion has ruined the prospects of a two-state solution. This reality will lead ultimately to an Apartheid-like set of circumstances in Palestine, which in turn will give rise to its own set of political agendas which surpass the presently gridlocked and unimaginative political discourse.