

May 2020

# Länderbericht

Office Palestinian Territories

## The End of the Oslo Peace Process?

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In the midst of the corona pandemic, the Palestinian leadership led by President Mahmoud Abbas announces the end of all cooperation with Israel. The decision immediately follows the swearing-in of the new Israeli government, whose coalition agreement permits unilateral annexations of the Jordan Valley and settlements in the West Bank. More than 25 years after the Oslo negotiations, the creeping disintegration of the peace process has reached its lowest point. A new peace initiative is needed.

On the evening of May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the Palestinian leadership met to discuss the consequences and further steps in dealing with Israeli annexations from parts of the West Bank. The meeting brought together the leadership of the Palestinian Authority (PA) with the leaders of the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization, recognized international representative of the Palestinians). The decisions should therefore be based on a broad foreign and domestic policy support. With the participation of PLO representatives, factions that are not part of the Palestinian government were also taking part (including the PFLP, which however quit the meeting). Hamas boycotts the PLO and therefore rejected the format as inadequate.

### The end of all cooperation

Following the meeting, President Abbas announced the results in a televised speech. Three aspects were particularly emphasized, which will ensure a rearrangement in the conflict with Israel:

- 1) The PLO, as the recognized international representative, and the Palestinian Authority are withdrawing from all agreements with Israeli and US authorities, including security cooperation.
- 2) Israel as the occupying power should exercise full responsibility over the

occupied territories in accordance with international law.

- 3) The PLO, as the international representative, shall promote accession to other UN organizations.

The termination of all agreements with Israel comes just two days after Benjamin Netanyahu's new government was sworn in. In their coalition agreement, annexations of parts of the West Bank are declared possible from July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020. There is also a majority for annexation plans in the Knesset.

The decisions should come into force immediately and not after the official announcement of annexations. It remains questionable whether this will entail a full return of the PA's responsibilities to Israel. The government authorities are in any case instructed to stop all cooperation with Israel. This results in a number of implications.

### The security-related and economic effects

The end of security cooperation with Israel does not immediately mean the end of the Palestinian security forces, as members of the Palestinian leadership emphasized after Abbas' televised speech. Cooperation with the Israeli forces is now prohibited, but the Palestinian security authorities will continue to maintain order in the Palestinian A-areas

and also prevent attacks against Israeli targets. The first few days after the announcement seem to confirm this. According to the Palestinian leadership, the further development of the situation now largely depends on how Israel deals with the annexation plans. The possibility of an emergency contact will continue to exist, especially with a view to the Corona pandemic. The Corona outbreak was comparatively light, partly because both sides reacted quickly, comprehensively and jointly.

The announced measures could also change the conflict domestically. Security cooperation has always been termed untouchable by President Abbas, although there have been many reservations about it among the Palestinian people. The cooperation was not only used specifically to counter terrorism, but also served Fatah to maintain power over Hamas. The end of the security cooperation thus not only reveals a threat to Israel – although President Abbas's speech condemned all terrorist activities – it also embodies the hopelessness of the Palestinian leadership, which is playing its last supposed trump card.

After the relocation of the US Embassy to Jerusalem, prompted by US President Donald Trump, and after his controversial Middle East Plan, as well as the ongoing expansion of settlements, the Palestinian leadership had often reacted cautiously, revealing the impotence of its limited capacity to act. After the relocation of the US Embassy, a PLO decision was issued that already announced the end of cooperation with Israel and the United States. However, there were only a few restrictions. But the pressure from the Palestinian people to take further action has increased enormously in recent months. Now the Palestinian side seems willing to act more consistently.

Termination of all agreements with Israel will also plunge the Palestinian economy

into recession amid the corona pandemic. The provisions of the Paris Protocol of 1994 resulted in cooperation on various trade and economic projects. A few days after the announcements, it still remains unclear what the economic implications are. Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh merely added that solutions should be found separately. For the Israeli side an end to the cooperation regarding the work of approximately 200,000 cheap Palestinian workers is likely to be painful. An integration of this workforce into the Palestinian labor market is in turn not feasible, the economic downward spiral in the West Bank would further accelerate. Ultimately, without countermeasures, there would be severe economic depression, with all of its negative social effects. As a result, dependency on international support would increase considerably. A humanitarian catastrophe similar to the Gaza Strip could result.

### **The implications on the Gaza Strip**

The "street's reaction" is likely to result in (violent) individual actions and civil disobedience. The fragmentation of the West Bank does not allow for a compact uprising. Israel has continued to militarize the occupation since the Second Intifada (2000 to 2005). The construction of the West Bank barrier, hundreds of mobile and fortified checkpoints as well as intelligence activities would probably nip an emerging conflagration in the bud. The reactions from the Gaza Strip, on the other hand, could be massive, so that the spiral of violence with rocket bombardment by extremist forces and bombing of the Israeli armed forces could result in numerous victims again. The humanitarian catastrophe in the Gaza Strip continues to worsen, especially in light of a global pandemic.

In contrary to the areas in the West Bank, the decision announced by President Abbas will have no administrative effect on the Gaza Strip. The Hamas was not involved in

the deliberations, although it welcomed the direction of the announced decisions in advance, namely the end of the cooperation with Israel. Unlike in the West Bank, the government in the Gaza Strip would not hand over any responsibility back to Israel. Hence, Hamas could now be one of the winners. Calls for a united Palestinian leadership, thus reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, are unmistakably present in the Palestinian debate. The differences in Palestinian politics are often seen as an obstacle to a viable strategy. In contrast to Fatah, Hamas would have government responsibility if the PA's competencies were consequently returned.

### The need for a new peace conference

The European Union and its Member States have repeatedly highlighted with great concern the dangers of a failure of the Middle East peace process. The European Union has always emphasized the unlawfulness of unilateral annexations under international law, not only in the context of the Middle East conflict. In particular, Israel's settlement expansion has been criticized several times. However, the EU's decision making made it difficult to draw conclusions due to the unanimity principle. The EU is in a difficult situation, on the one hand it has to take account of the special relations with Israel and on the other hand it has to be committed to international law, on the basis of which a two-state solution is to be realized. On the day of the decision of the Palestinian leadership, the German government underlined the support for such a two-state solution within the framework of the German-Palestinian Steering Committee.

However, the Oslo peace process that was supposed to implement this two-state solution has now come to an end. The originally provisional division of the West Bank became a one-state reality over the course of a quarter of a century, in which Israel largely determined the scope for

action of the Palestinians. In the course of the Oslo negotiations, the Israeli and Palestinian leadership agreed in 1993 to split the West Bank into A, B and C areas for a limited period of time, but this division continues to the present day. The C areas make up approximately 62 percent of the West Bank and are under full Israeli administration. Areas A (approx. 18 %) are controlled by the Palestinian Authority (PA) and mainly include the Palestinian cities. The B areas (approx. 20 %) are managed jointly by Israeli security and Palestinian civil authorities. At the end of further negotiations, an independent Palestinian state should emerge. The Oslo provisions were implemented, but the talks that should have followed and the gradual withdrawal of the Israeli armed forces were never properly implemented. The Palestinian leadership has now declared an end to this provisional arrangement.

During this time, the Palestinian leadership has largely failed to develop a viable strategy for establishing its own state. In order to hide this strategic mistake, among other things, the Palestinian leadership is now taking an extreme measure and it is shifting the conflict situation into a new dimension.

Only an international peace conference with credible and reliable mediators seems to show a diplomatic way out. The Palestinian leadership is seeking such a new peace initiative based on UN resolutions and the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002. The United States will no longer be able or willing to fulfill the mediating role that has often been assigned to it. The European Union, on the other hand, is now urged to take initiative and to exert its influence on both sides, whether alone or within the framework of the Middle East Quartet (EU, Russia, USA, United Nations). Without an international peace conference, the extremist and radical forces on both sides will be strengthened. Should an international peace initiative not succeed, a destabilization could arise in the neighborhood of the EU. The effects of

regional conflicts, terrorism, and migration could be felt also in Europe.

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