

Palestinian Authority restores “cooperation” with Israel as Pompeo visits West Bank

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The Palestinian Authority (PA) has announced a series of grovelling moves aimed at satisfying US President-elect Joe Biden’s conditions for restarting the fraudulent “peace negotiations” with Israel, abandoned three years ago by President Donald Trump.

On Tuesday, Hussein al-Sheikh, the PA’s civil affairs minister, tweeted that “the relationship with Israel would return to how it was” and that the Palestinians had received written and verbal pledges from Israel to stick to previous agreements. The PA would therefore be renewing civil and security cooperation with Israel.

The PA’s statements came amid US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s visit to Israel as part of a wider tour of the Middle East to coordinate its offensive against Iran. Yesterday (Thursday) Pompeo made an unprecedented trip to a winery in the Israeli settlement town of Psagot in the West Bank, illegal under international law, the first such visit by a top US official. He also paid a visit to the occupied Golan Heights, the Syrian territory illegally annexed by Israel.

Following his visit to Psagot, Pompeo issued a statement saying the US would require goods imported from areas “where Israel exercises the relevant authorities” to be marked as “Israel” or “Made in Israel” or “Product of Israel” in contravention of international law regarding occupied land. He also pledged to crack down on the Boycott Divest and Sanction (BDS) movement, branding it as anti-Semitic and thereby outlawing any criticism and opposition to Israel, including its war drive, as anti-Semitic.

In the face of this demonstrative endorsement of Israel’s war crimes in the West Bank and other occupied territories, the PA took its decision on the strength of assurances from Biden’s transition team that the new administration would—subject to the Palestinians meeting its demands—reset US relations with the PA. This would include restoring aid to the Palestinians frozen by Trump

and reopening the US consulate in East Jerusalem and the Palestinian mission in Washington.

In a telephone call with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Tuesday, Biden expressed support for Israel’s future as a “Jewish and democratic state.”

This was taken to imply Biden’s backing for a “two-state” solution that everyone, bar the Palestinian bourgeoisie, long ago wrote off as a chimera.

The response among the Palestinians at large was one of indifference if not disgust, reflecting the widespread belief that negotiations with Israel are utterly futile.

In May, PA President Mahmoud Abbas ended civil and security cooperation with Israel in response to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s plans to annex the Israeli settlements and the Jordan Valley in the West Bank, which Israel has illegally occupied since 1967. Such a move, sanctioned by the Trump administration under its so-called “deal of the century” announced in January, was in flagrant breach of the Washington-brokered 1993 Oslo Accords that envisaged that the West Bank would form part of a Palestinian state.

Israel’s normalization agreements with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Sudan, with Saudi Arabia’s nod of approval—making explicit what had long been implicit—have postponed the annexation for the time being. At the same time, they ensured that Palestinian efforts to get the Arab League to condemn the US’s measures and come to their rescue failed.

The main victims of “cutting ties with Israel” were the Palestinian workers and their families. The PA had refused to accept the monthly \$100 million taxes collected by Israel on its behalf that constitute about 60 percent of its revenue. This was because of Israel’s deduction of an amount equivalent to the PA’s payments to prisoners in jail in Israel and their families from taxes that Israel collects for the PA and remits to Ramallah. This precipitated a severe financial crisis, with the PA unable

to pay the full salaries of tens of thousands of civil servants and teachers, many of whom, before the pandemic, took on another part-time job to make ends meet and went on strike last month in protest.

This came on top of Washington's ending in 2018 its \$200 million annual funding for the PA and its demand, earlier this year, that its Gulf allies cut their financial grants and aid to the PA amid the pandemic, after the PA rejected President Trump's farcical "deal of the century."

A few days ago, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), whose \$360 million annual funding from the US was also terminated, announced it would be unable to pay its 28,000 employees their full salaries unless it raised \$70 million by the end of the month, affecting their staff and the refugees themselves across the region.

In June, the World Bank warned that the Palestinian economy could contract by as much as 11 percent in 2020 in the wake of the lockdown measures that have halted tourism and forced the closure of businesses already struggling to survive.

The halting of civil coordination with Israel has also impacted on health care, with Palestinian patients needing medical treatment in Israeli hospitals unable to obtain travel permits, and new born babies unable to obtain official documentation from Israel because the PA had not informed the Israeli authorities of their existence.

While the PA made much of its ending of security cooperation with Israel, there is little evidence that it did so, especially since Washington continued its \$42 million monthly funding of the PA's security forces, the largest per capita in the world.

The PA is also reportedly preparing—in response to demands by the Democrats—to end the stipends it pays the families of Palestinians killed, injured or jailed for opposing Israel's brutal occupation under Israel's military "justice" system." Israel has long denounced such payments from a so-called "martyrs' fund" as "pay to slay," claiming they encourage "terrorism" because they assure would-be assailants that their dependents will be provided for, with those serving the longest sentence receiving the most. The Trump administration has justified its ending of funding and other punitive measures against the Palestinians, citing various anti-terrorism measures enacted by Congress.

The PA is also set to end its stipends to the families of those killed by Israel, another very sensitive issue among Palestinians, following pressure from Nickolay Mladenov,

the United Nations envoy to the Middle East, along with diplomats from Norway and Germany.

While the PA is expected to resume cooperation with Israel immediately, it is unclear whether it will also restore its ties to the Trump administration. On Wednesday, the PA announced it had returned its envoys to the UAE and Bahrain, after recalling them in protest at their normalization agreements with Israel.

That the PA has fallen in line so rapidly without a single concession from Israel is indicative of its political isolation and reliance on Israel and its patron in Washington for life support.

Pompeo's trip is also part of a broader effort to shore up Netanyahu's political position. Netanyahu is facing an escalating economic, social and health care crisis amid the pandemic and his own trial on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust in three separate cases that could see him spend his last years in jail.

For months, there have been twice-weekly demonstrations demanding his resignation. He faces growing opposition to his botched handling of the coronavirus pandemic and the economy, with only 27 percent of the population believing he has managed the health crisis effectively.

Some 2,739 people in a country of 9 million have died, with more than 80 percent of the deaths having occurred since the hasty lifting of the first lockdown in May. More than 600 Palestinians have died in the West Bank and 55 in Gaza. Like their counterparts elsewhere, the ruling cliques in Israel, West Bank and Gaza refuse to sanction a full lockdown that would jeopardise profits.

Even before the pandemic, 26 percent of households in Israel, including 841,000 children were living in poverty or near poverty. Unemployment has risen to 21 percent. A recent survey by the Economist Intelligence Unit ranked Tel Aviv as the fifth most expensive city in the world, more costly than living in New York City, with a one-kilo loaf of bread in Tel Aviv costing \$5.63.

At the same time, tensions within the Likud-Blue and White coalition threaten to blow apart the prospect of setting a budget that must be agreed by December 23, triggering the fourth elections since April 2019.



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