**Bypass Abbas and Ax UNRWA in Pursuit of Peace**

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Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas reminded us once again last Saturday why he and his Palestinian demi-government may need be sidelined for sake of peace in the region: because he and the so-called “Authority” in the West Bank are corrupt, ossified and obstructionist in every way.

At a meeting of the PLO Central Council, Abbas called on Palestinians to “keep the ground aflame with popular resistance” against Israel – code words for violence, if not terrorism. Abbas’s main foreign policy deputy, PLO Secretary-General Saeb Erekat, went on to lead the council in declaring support for “heroic” Hamas-led attacks against Israeli troops and civilians across the Gaza border, while condemning Hamas for negotiating a truce with Israel.

The resolution also savaged the Trump administration for seeking to “destroy the Palestinian national project” and of course called to ratchet-up boycott, divestment and sanctions campaigns against Israel.

Abbas’s actions appear driven by his marginalization, with Israel and the Trump administration Mideast team clearly planning to bypass the PA altogether, in favor of a plan to enhance security and economic prospects in the Gaza Strip. This marginalization is in turn driven by Abbas’s self-inflicted wounds, sourced in the fecklessness and growing radicalization of Abbas and his aging coterie.

Remember: Abbas has fled from real negotiation and compromise with Israel at every opportunity over the past 15 years. He has espoused maximalist positions, stoked hatred of Israelis and Jews, inculcated a culture that denies Jewish history and national identity, venerated terrorists, and pushed the criminalization of Israel internationally. He has driven most Israelis to the realization, alas, that there is no reasonable peace deal with the Palestinians to be had at this time.

Abbas walked away from prime minister Ehud Olmert’s outrageously generous territorial offer in 2008; refused peace talks with Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu even after Netanyahu froze settlement construction in 2009; and left US secretary of state John Kerry out in the cold when the latter tried to negotiate peace in 2014.

At the UN, he has called Israel at various times brutal, aggressive, racist, apartheid, horrific and colonial, and accused it of numerous crimes, including ethnic cleansing and genocide. Then he calls (repeatedly) on the international community to unilaterally recognize Palestinian statehood and to “compel” Israeli withdrawals – without the Palestinians having to compromise at all with Israel.

In recent years, Abbas has sworn that he will “never” recognize Israel as the national state of the Jewish people, never forgo the so-called right of return to Israel of Palestinian refugees, never accept Israeli security control of the Jordan Valley and other key air and ground security assets, never allow Jews to live in Judea, and never accept Israeli sovereignty in any part of Jerusalem’s Old City.

Since 2015, Abbas has added to this fanatical portfolio a campaign of whole-scale denial of Jewish national rights in the Holy Land. He has proposed repeated UNESCO and other international resolutions that explicitly dismiss Jewish history in Jerusalem and Zion.

And he continues to rant dangerously about non-existent Israeli “aggression and provocations against holy al-Aqsa Mosque and Christian sanctuaries in Jerusalem” – another way, again, of inciting Palestinian violence against Israel.

So it’s no wonder that the emerging American peace initiative seeks to bypass Abbas and his PLO rejectionists, and perhaps to initiate a long process in which Palestinians act to replace their past-sell-date rulers – effectively, dictators focused on their own survival in power – with more reasonable leaders.

Abbas, of course, lost Gaza to Hamas dictatorship in 2007, and Hamas has no intention of submitting to Fatah-led PA dominion ever again. Hamas has established a de facto standalone Palestinian state in Gaza, one that will never make peace with Israel, but that can be contained and managed – perhaps developed for betterment of Palestinians who live there, with Israeli (and Arab state) support – if Hamas cares to do so.

This relegates Abbas to the back burner, marking a major shift in the diplomatic arena, which explains Abbas’s efforts to torpedo the nascent Israel-Hamas arrangements for fear of being further sidelined.

But Abbas has left himself with zero leverage on Israel, the US, the international community, and even the Sunni Arab world. As long as he clings to rhetoric of resistance and rituals of Israel-bashing (while suckling corruptly at the teats of generous international financial aid) he and his Fatah Party remain irrelevant saboteurs, not partners, of peace.

TO THIS END, the Trump administration’s hard-nosed approach to the Palestinians, including its cut-off of aid to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), is useful. As Dr. Einat Wilf and Adi Schwartz write in their important new book, The War of Return, everlasting Palestinian refugee-dom and self-imposed victimhood has been fostered and coddled for too long.

UNRWA is a root problem. It perpetuates the Palestinian dream of return to homes in Jaffa and Haifa, ultimately destroying the Jewish state. “When 70% of people who live in Gaza believe that they are refugees, and are stamped by the UN as such, you cannot fault them for thinking that their ‘right’ of return is internationally sanctioned,” Wilf explains. “This is continuation of war against Israel. PA officials pay lip service to a two-state solution, but in reality are convinced that masses of refugees will return.

“The world literally has no problem telling the Jews that they won’t have it all. Why not tell the Palestinians? Why continue to fund a UN agency with more than a billion dollars every year, feeding the delusion of return?

“And how will positive change in Palestinian leadership come about, when Palestinians have no sense of their true (weak) power, because they think that the world is with them at any cost, indefinitely? They have no incentive to compromise with Israel!”

Change also must come in Israeli policy. The IDF Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories has been UNRWA’s main defender in recent years – because the defense establishment believes that international aid dollars flowing through UNRWA buy quiet in the territories.

Wilf attacks: “Unfortunately, defense establishments don’t know how to deal with narratives, such as ending the ultimately corrosive and corrupting right-of-return narrative. They know only how to maintain order, even if that means purchasing calm at the cost of a war that will go on for decades.”

Such Israeli short-sidedness must be replaced by a longer view, which means phasing out UNRWA, as recently proposed, for example, by Dave Harden, who led the American assistance mission to the West Bank and Gaza for more than a decade.

While acknowledging its good work in tough places, Harden suggests a 10-year exit strategy for UNRWA from the West Bank and Gaza. In Jordan, the exit could come sooner, through a 10-year block grant to Jordan for Palestinian refugee resettlement. And in Syria and Lebanon, refugee operations could be shifted from UNRWA to the UN High Commission for Refugees, immediately.

It’s high-time for the PLO to be showered with the “tough love” once reserved uniquely for Israel. And Israel’s defense establishment should get behind the ditch-UNRWA discourse.