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On “Shrinking the Conflict,” Abbas’ UN Speech, and the PA’s Ability to Adjust to the Status Quo

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Khalil Shikaki

The September 2021 UN speech of Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority (PA), and the careful language it used, indicate that he appreciates the severity of the crisis in which that leadership finds itself today and the limited options it has. For one, it seems almost certain that the current domestic conditions will continue to deteriorate given the dim prospects for holding elections, reaching a reconciliation deal, or bringing about significant economic growth. Similarly, Palestinian-Israeli stalemate will most likely persist for some time to come even after the handover of the premiership from Naftali Bennett to Yair Lapid. It is almost certain that the current Israeli governmental coalition, or any one that is likely to come after it in the near future, will not be able to enter into a serious negotiating process with the PA. Thirdly, the international community, including the U.S., seems to lack the vision and the political will to go beyond the current goal of managing the conflict, to prevent an explosion or a dramatic change in the current Palestinian-Israeli relations. A glance at the regional landscape points to the dismal setting of PA alignment; indeed, the collapsed Arab consensus on the Palestinian question provides the evidence, if any is needed, of the constrained environment in which the Palestinian leadership operates.

Does this pessimistic assessment allow the PA, in its search for political alternatives, to reach beyond the goal of maintaining the status quo? If the answer is positive, what are these alternatives? For example, can the concept of the so-called “shrinking the conflict,” an approach advocated by some of the leaders of the current Israeli coalition, provide a working framework for organizing Palestinian-Israeli relations in the short run despite the freeze in the political process? This brief explores the current Palestinian policy, especially as outlined by president Abbas in his 2021 UN speech. It concludes that while options do indeed exist, it is unlikely that the PA will be able to capitalize on any of them given the decisions already made by its leadership during the last few years, and particularly those made during the past six months. At best, it can aspire to maintain the status quo during the next year or two. But it also concludes that it would be dangerous for the PA and the international community to be drawn into the Israeli right-wing approach of “shrinking the conflict” given the likely destructive impact it could have on the future viability of the two-state solution.

Abbas’ declared policy:

In his 2021 UN speech Abbas asserted his conviction that the “policies of the international community and the UN organizations have so far all failed” in resolving the conflict or forcing Israel to abide by

international law. Yet, in an obvious contradiction with this assertion, which is fully endorsed by an internal Palestinian consensus, the president stated that he intends to seek support from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) “to issue a decision on the legality of the occupation of the territories of the state of Palestine and the responsibilities of the UN and its member states in this regard.” He further added his belief that “all sides must abide by the resolution that will be issued by the ICJ because colonization and apartheid are banned by international law and they are crimes that must be confronted and dismantled.”¹ It is certain that the president fully understands the contradiction in his declared policy. This contradiction fades if we realize that the actual policy of the PA is not to rely on the international community and the UN to end the Israeli occupation and that it only seeks their support in managing the conflict and preventing further deterioration in the status quo.

The president and the rest of the PA’s political elite, no doubt realize that the best they can expect from ICJ is a moral victory, one that can be added to the one that was achieved back in 2004 when the court issued its advisory opinion regarding the separation wall or barrier. At that time, the court asserted that “Israel must put an immediate end to the violation of its international obligations by ceasing the works of construction of the wall and dismantling those parts of that structure situated within Occupied Palestinian Territory” and, most importantly, added that the Fourth Geneva Convention is “applicable in those Palestinian territories which, before the armed conflict of 1967, lay to the east of the 1949 Armistice demarcation line (or “Green Line”) and were occupied by Israel during that conflict.”² Israel did not stop the construction of the wall and continued to ignore its obligations under that convention. The PA’s complaint to the same court against the U.S. regarding its decision to relocate its embassy to Jerusalem, which was submitted in September 2018, has not yet been addressed more than three years later. Other international organizations, such as the International Criminal Court (ICC), have been looking into other Palestinian complaints, all of which contribute to the PA’s efforts to wage a diplomatic campaign against Israel. One should not however measure PA success in these efforts by criteria other than protecting the status quo. It cannot force Israel to end its occupation, halt settlement activities, or even stop demolition of Palestinian homes. It cannot force Israel to sit down at the negotiating table.

In his UN speech, president Abbas returned to a topic he addressed many times before during the past decade, asking Israel to choose between the two-state and the one-state solutions. But this time, he did not threaten to abandon the two-state solution; to the contrary, he reiterated his commitment to that solution. In the meanwhile, playing the role of a political analyst to convey his message to Israel, he described the current conditions as “the embodiment of a one apartheid state” and that “our people and the entire world will not accept that outcome and the data and developments on the ground will impose full and equal rights to all in the historic land of Palestine in a single state.” The president realizes that political analysis is no substitute for policy and that a continued adoption of the two-state solution by the Palestinian side, at a time in which he himself asserts that it has no future, is essentially an abandonment of his leadership role in policy making. The PA cannot continue to promote the two-state solution unless it sees in the one-state solution a threat to its vital interests. But the president’s analysis indicated the opposite and presented a one-state with equal rights as a vital Palestinian interest just as the two-state solution. It is clear that the aim of the president’s public statement is to maintain the status quo, to

¹ For more information on Abbas’ speech, see: Ali Sawafta and Zainah El-haroun, “Abbas tells U.N. Israeli actions could lead to ‘one state’,” *Reuters*, September 24, 2021: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/abbas-tells-un-israeli-actions-could-lead-one-state-2021-09-24/>

² [Latest developments | Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory | International Court of Justice \(ici-cij.org\)](https://www.ici-cij.org/)

remain committed to the two-state solution, despite its lack of viability, while simultaneously threatening an adoption of the one-state solution; in other words, a continuation of the diplomatic offensive against Israel in the hope of slowing down the process of the one-state reality.

Finally, the president hinted that he might change PLO's Israel's recognition formula by wondering: "why should the recognition of Israel remain in place on the basis of the 1967 boundaries?" Earlier in his speech, the president pointed to the possibility of a Palestinian return "to a solution based on the Partition Resolution number 181 for the year 1947, one that gives the Palestinian state 44% of the land, which is twice the size of the land based on the 1967 boundaries." Nothing in this formula indicates a threat to withdraw the PLO recognition of the state of Israel contained in the 1993 PLO-Israel exchanged letters of mutual recognition. If the president does officially inform Israel of his decision to revise the recognition letter, so that it would be restricted to Israel's partition resolution boundaries, unlikely as that might be, he would be escalating the diplomatic campaign, but it would not affect the current relations between the two sides including the ongoing security and civil coordination.

“Shrinking the conflict:” the policy of the current Israeli coalition

The current Israeli policy towards the Palestinians indicates a continuation of the previous right-wing policy with small adjustments. The policy is comprised of three elements that form what seems to be the maximum understandings binding the current ruling coalition. They address the position on the two-state solution and the political process or negotiations, the modalities of progress in the settlement enterprise, and the search for confidence building measures. In the Gaza Strip, there does not seem to be any significant differences with the policy of the former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu which sought to keep the siege the blockade in place, promote a continued split between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and ensuring a situation in which Hamas poses no real military threat to Israel but without threatening a humanitarian disaster or the collapse of the Hamas role or its ability to keep security and civil conditions under control.

Under U.S. pressure, Netanyahu, in his Bar Ilan University speech in 2009, declared verbally his acceptance of the two-state solution. The current prime minister publicly rejects that solution and reiterates continuously to his base and right-wing allies that he is more hardline line than Netanyahu. Similarly, despite the fact that the former government entered, between 2013 and 2014, into substantive negotiations with Abbas in a U.S. sponsored process, the current government refuses to sit down to a negotiating table with the Palestinians.

On settlements, the current ruling coalition seems able to proceed, albeit slowly, on a number of highly visible and charged settlement projects that are capable when completed to erase any prospects for a negotiated outcome on the basis of a two-state solution. For example, the Israeli Civil Administration started early this month to hear objections to planned construction in the area designated E-1, located between occupied East Jerusalem and Jericho, a critical phase among the last steps in the planning process before issuing final approval and invite tenders.³ When established, this settlement divides the

³ For details, see *Terrestrial Jerusalem*: "Dangerous Developments towards Construction in E-1," October 11, 2021: <https://t-j.org.il/2021/10/11/dangerous-developments-towards-construction-in-e-1/>

West Bank into two isolated parts, south and north, and isolates East Jerusalem from the West Bank, and makes it impossible for East Jerusalem to become the capital of the Palestinian state.

Similarly, during the past two months Israel started preparation for the planning phase of a large settlement to the north of East Jerusalem containing nine thousand housing units to be located in what is currently the Qalandia airport, between Ramallah and East Jerusalem.⁴ Moreover, in mid-October, an Israeli committee approved plans to advance the building of thousands of housing units in Givat Hamatos settlement, a settlement designed to isolate East Jerusalem from Beth Lehem in the south, as it will be built on lands confiscated from Sharafat and Beit Safafa. Back in November 2020, the Israeli government gave the green light to issue tenders to begin construction in that area.⁵

Inside occupied East Jerusalem, plans have been advanced to build a new settlement dubbed the “Silicon Valley,” which will be build over an area extending 250 thousand square meters in the heart of Wadi al Joz. The settlement, intended to be a high tech park, leads to demolishing some 200 East Jerusalem establishments owned by Palestinian residents who have already received eviction orders back in mid-2020.⁶ Similarly, Palestinian home owners in al Shaikh Jarrah are still threatened with eviction as their case is still under examination in Israeli courts without a final resolution while awaiting a compromise deal, proposed by the court, to allow the Palestinian residents to stay in an agreement with Israeli settlers but only if the home owners admit that they are not the rightful owners of the homes. Finally, the decision by an Israeli court early this month to allow “silent prayer” of Israeli Jews at al Haram al Sharif indicates an unprecedented and critical change in Palestinian-Israeli relations in this holy place since East Jerusalem was occupied in 1967. The Jerusalem district court that reversed that decision two days after the first decision was issued does not mitigate the gradual damage done to the “status quo” in the holy places by this and many other measures in recent years. The “status quo” arrangement has helped to maintain a fragile stability in Palestinian-Jewish relations in that location sensitive to both Jews and Muslims, without which the holy places could become once again the spark for the next explosion.⁷

Finally, while it was not feasible for Palestinians and Israelis during the past decade to explore means of addressing Israeli-imposed measures that negatively affect socio, economic, and daily life conditions of

⁴ On the planned Qalandia airport (or Atarot) settlement, see, Peace Now, “The plan for 9,000 units in Atarot south of Ramallah is promoted,” 08.8.21: <https://peacenow.org.il/en/the-plan-for-9000-units-in-atarot-south-of-ramallah-is-promoted> See also, Aljazeera, “New Israeli plan a ‘dangerous blow to the two-state solution’,” 17 Aug 2021: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/17/new-israeli-plan-a-final-nail-in-coffin-of-two-state-solution>, and Daoud Kuttab, “Another push to make Qalandia Airport a Jewish settlement,” al-Monitor, February 26, 2020: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/02/israel-plan-settlement-qalandia-airport-jerusalem-palestine.html>

⁵ For more information of recent developments regarding Givat Hamatos, see: *Middle East Monitor*, Israel approves thousands of illegal settlement homes in East Jerusalem, October 14, 2021: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20211014-israel-approves-thousands-of-illegal-settlement-homes-in-east-jerusalem/>. For reports on this and other recent advances, see: Joseph Krauss, “Israel quietly advances settlements with little US pushback,” Associated Press, October 15, 2021: [Israel quietly advances settlements with little US pushback \(apnews.com\)](https://apnews.com/israel-quietly-advances-settlements-with-little-US-pushback). See also, Nir Hasson and Jonathan Lis, “Israel Advances Thousands of Housing Units in East Jerusalem as Biden Remains Silent: The Biden administration is so far refraining, at least publicly, from pressuring Israel to freeze construction plans beyond the Green Line,” *Haaretz*, Oct. 14, 2021: [Israel advances thousands of housing units in East Jerusalem as Biden remains silent](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-advances-thousands-of-housing-units-in-east-jerusalem-as-biden-remains-silent). On the same subject, see, Ir Amim, Confluence of Major Settlement Advancements in East Jerusalem and Vicinity Further Imperils Viability of Agreed Political Resolution, 15 October 2021: [Confluence of Major Settlement Advancements in East Jerusalem and Vicinity Further Imperils Viability of Agreed Resolution \(mailchi.mp\)](https://www.mailchi.com/ir-amim/confluence-of-major-settlement-advancements-in-east-jerusalem-and-vice-versa-further-imperils-viability-of-agreed-political-resolution)

⁶ On the “Silicon Wadi” settlement, see, Aaron Boxerman, “As mammoth high-tech hub is eyed for East Jerusalem, will it benefit locals?” *Times of Israel*, 14 June 2020: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/as-mammoth-high-tech-hub-is-eyed-for-east-jerusalem-will-it-benefit-locals/>; on same topic, see also, Ir Amim, “Local Planning Committee Advances Controversial “Silicon Wadi” Plan,” 13 October 2021: <https://mailchi.com/ir-amim/local-planning-committee-advances-controversial-silicon-wadi-plan>

⁷ On silent prayer at al Haram al Sharif, see, Ir Amim, “Despite District Court Reversal, Lower Court Ruling is a Lethal Blow to Status Quo on Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif,” 12 October 2021: <https://mailchi.com/ir-amim/despite-district-court-reversal-lower-court-ruling-is-a-lethal-blow-to-status-quo-on-temple-mountharam-al-sharif>

Palestinians, the current Israeli prime minister announced that Israel and the PA have a joint interest in improving living conditions of the Palestinians. Israeli defense minister Benny Gantz met with the Palestinian president in August in order to offer confidence building measures that aim at strengthening the Palestinian economy, as the minister announced⁸, and begin to resolve thousands of cases of Palestinian family members who have been denied valid identity cards or passports, and provide the PA with access to about half a billion Shekels of advanced Palestinian custom clearance funds. Progress has also been reported on a formula that would allow Palestinian telecommunication companies access to 4-G technology, increasing the number of laborers allowed to work in Israel, and granting building permits for a number of units in area C. These measures seem to stem from a conceptual framework labeled “shrinking the conflict,”⁹ one that Israel sees as an alternative to conflict resolution based on ending the occupation and building permanent peace based on the two-state solution. The Israeli prime minister described this vision of managing the conflict with the Palestinians during his first visit to the U.S. and his meeting with the U.S. president in August, as the U.S. was attempting to explore possible measures to revive political dialogue between Palestinians and Israelis.¹⁰

A new equation

A new equation emerges from the discussion so far: a temporary Palestinian interest in maintaining the status quo confronted by a more hardline Israeli government lacking any serious interest in reviving the political process but showing greater openness to engage in confidence building measures. It is clear that the Israeli policy is not satisfactory to the PA or the international community, but no one is questioning the shrinking of the conflict. Rather, the opposition to the idea is centered on the making it a substitute to a viable political process. Since the U.S. and most players in the international community share the view that the prevailing conditions are not ripe for a resumption of negotiations, there is no real resistance to the Israeli policy. The U.S. has positively viewed the Israeli confidence building measures and encouraged the two sides to engage in further mutual steps in the same direction. Similarly, the Palestinian side too has shown interest in the Israeli measures seeing them helpful in shoring up support for the weak PA. In fact, a majority of the Palestinian public itself (56%) expressed support for the such measures that aim at improving daily living conditions in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, including such steps as family unifications or providing the PA with additional financial resources; only 35% expressed viewed them negatively.¹¹

⁸ See the following reports on the meeting: Anna Ahronheim, Tovah Lazaroff, Lahav Harkov, “Gantz offers Abbas series of goodwill gestures in rare Ramallah meeting,” Jerusalem Post, August 30, 2021: <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/gantz-meets-abu-mazen-in-ramallah-after-bennett-biden-meet-678070>, and Aaron Boxerman, “In first top-level meeting in a decade, Gantz holds talks with Abbas in Ramallah,” Times of Israel, 30 August 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-rare-meeting-gantz-holds-talks-with-pa-president-abbas-in-ramallah/>

⁹ On the origin of the concept, see NPR interview with Micah Goodman: “Philosopher Micah Goodman Is An Unofficial Counsel To Israel's Prime Minister,” [Philosopher Micah Goodman Is An Unofficial Counsel To Israel's Prime Minister : NPR](https://www.npr.com/2021/09/16/philosopher-micah-goodman-is-an-unofficial-counsel-to-israel-s-prime-minister); See also, Bennett's interview with *the New York Times*: [Israel's Naftali Bennett Backs Hard Line on Iran, Softer Tone With U.S. - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/16/israel-naftali-bennett-backs-hard-line-on-iran-softer-tone-with-u-s.html). See also, Neri Zilber, “Israel's new plan is to 'shrink,' not solve, the Palestinian conflict. Here's what that looks like

September 16, 2021: <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/09/16/middleeast/israel-palestinian-conflict-cmd-intl/index.html>; Meron Rapoport, “The Israeli right tried to manage the conflict. Bennett wants to 'shrink' it,” *972mag*, August 12, 2021: <https://www.972mag.com/bennett-saar-goodman-shrinking-conflict/>; and, Jacob Kornbluh, “How Biden and Bennett will push the restart button on U.S.-Israel relations,” *Forward*, August 24, 2021: <https://forward.com/news/474570/how-biden-and-bennett-intend-to-push-the-restart-button-on-us-israel/>

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ See PSR's September 2021 poll: <http://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/858>

Can the Palestinian realization that maintaining the status quo is the best that can be expected and the Israeli willingness to engage in policies consistent with “shrinking the conflict” create a less volatile Palestinian-Israeli relation, one in which the next year or two see more stability compared to that of the last two years? What would the cost of such a short-term stability be for the longer run?

The answer to the short-term question is not necessarily negative despite the clear obstacles. Palestinian domestic push and pull and those necessitated by the Israeli coalition needs might produce a short-term stability. For example, on the one hand, the heightened competition between the Fatah-controlled PA and Hamas is a clear source of tension and polarization in Palestinian politics and society, especially in the aftermath of the fourth Hamas-Israel war of May 2021. PA weakness and lack of electoral legitimacy provide it with the incentive to strive to compensate for its failures by winning points against Hamas, either by delivering on some of the public needs, even if that comes as crumbs from the Israeli side, or by waging a widespread diplomatic campaign against Israel. Most likely the PA will find itself forced to pursue both channels simultaneously: diplomatic warfare and confidence building measures. This outcome will most likely be the product of the two other elements of the Israeli policy, the rejection of negotiations and the two-state solution and the pursuit of the most devastating settlement projects that can, if implemented, decide once and for all the destiny of the two-state solution.

Unfortunately, given its current policies, the PA will not be able to articulate an effective means of challenging the status quo. For example, if it wanted to capitalize on the “shrinking the conflict” approach by exploiting the process of Arab normalization with Israel to broaden and consolidate the confidence building measures, it will not have the capacity or the political will to use that process to push forward its own plans. These plans could encompass the strengthen of PA presence in East Jerusalem, or investing in area C, or even persuading the Israeli government to abandon or slow down its current settlement offensive. But the cost is too high. Any PA readiness to deal positively with Arab normalization will open a flood gate of normalization, with Saudi Arabia among the first to enter. Such a development could engender further dynamics of Palestinian marginalization and increase PA domestic isolation by widening the current gap with the Palestinian public and provide Hamas with a greater opportunity to affirm its leadership of the Palestinian people as an alternative to the national movement.

By contrast, if the PA wanted to strengthen its diplomatic confrontation with Israel by adding more effective non-violent means of resistance, for example, by channeling public anger and frustration toward massive civilian participation in that resistance, it will find itself unable to do so due to the current distrust expressed by the public toward the PA. On top of that, the PA security establishment will probably see such massive civilian participation a prelude to the “militarization” of the resistance and a threat to its current control over the street; indeed, it might fear that such popular mobilization and participation might get out of control and turn against the PA itself.

On the Israeli side, the right-wing government will be under great pressure to respond firmly against any important hostile PA diplomatic measures. Abbas’ UN speech has already given Israel a full year without embarking on such measures. Yet even if he embarks on such measures now, the Israeli leadership will probably understand the pressure he is under. To appease the right wing base, Israel’s response might focus on speeding up the settlement construction process rather than halting the implementation of the confidence building measures. On the other hand, if Abbas sought to capitalize on the normalization process, unlikely as it might seem, Israel might find itself having to deal positively with such PA initiatives or risk having to explain to the Arab normalizers why their willingness to abandon Arab consensus is not being reciprocated.

Conclusion: shrinking or expanding the conflict?

Needless to say, the only means of shrinking the conflict is by shrinking the occupation and the settlement enterprise. But the Israeli government's understanding of the approach can only produce the opposite outcome. Major settlement plans will advance and along with them the consolidation and deepening of the occupation. Would the PA, given its interest in self-preservation, be content with modest diplomatic measures while engaging in confidence building measures in which it accepts what crumbs the Israeli government, given its interest in maintaining the cohesion of its parliamentary coalition, might be willing to offer?

This might indeed be the short-term policy of the PA. Given its inability to formulate a unified Palestinian position without reconciliation, elections, or deep reforms in its political system, the PA will be seen by all concerned as weak and incapable of taking the initiative or even responding to one. It will not earn international respect. Under these conditions, none of the major international players will use leverage against Israel to initiate a process capable of containing the current Israeli settlement activities, accept the two-state solution, or enter into a political process for a permanent settlement. The capitulation of the PA and the international community to the resilient status quo will inevitably bring Palestinian-Israeli relations to a point of no return, one in which all sides come to the conclusion that the two-state solution is no longer viable.

This is an inescapable conclusion. The belief that the PA, that has already tied its own hands by the decisions it has previously taken, remains capable of developing more effective options is wishful thinking. Similarly, the belief that the Palestinian public cannot be forced to swallow this outcome without resistance is a miscalculation. The public is leaderless and none of its movements and political parties are capable or willing, under current conditions, to forge ahead, influence the Palestinian masses, and earn its trust to the point at which it can provide a viable alternative path to that offered by the current Palestinian leadership. This conclusion applies to those who are capable, such as Hamas and the forces that support Marwan Barghouti, and those who are not, such as the leftist forces, the newly created electoral lists, or supporters of Mohammad Dahlan.

Finally, the international community will not move in any substantive manner if it believes the prospects of success are limited. But it might be willing to move in response to a new explosion in Palestinian-Israeli relations, an unexpected development at this time if it was not for Hamas' propensity to take high risks that allows it to accumulate greater gains at the expense of the PA. Similarly, in the absence of a stronger and unified PA, one that enjoys electoral legitimacy and the trust of its people, accountable public institutions, and vibrant pluralistic civil society and free press, all currently lacking, the international community will have little incentives to take a stronger stand against the current Israeli policy.

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