



Renewal of Israel-Palestinian Authority Civilian and Security Coordination Initial update and significance

November 24, 2020

Overview

On November 17, 2020, Hussein al-Sheikh, a close associate of Mahmoud Abbas, announced **that relations between the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Israel would return to the status quo ante, i.e., the renewal of civilian and security coordination with Israel** before May 19, 2020 (when Mahmoud Abbas announced the cessation of coordination). During a television interview he called the renewal of relations **a victory for the Palestinian people** because Israel, he claimed, recognized agreements signed with the PLO, **meaning that [the Trump] "deal of the century" was no longer on the agenda**. To support his statement he published a letter sent to him by General Kamil Abu Rukun, the Israeli Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT). In the letter Israel reiterated its commitment to bilateral agreements with the Palestinians.



Hussein al-Sheikh interviewed by Palestinian TV, praising the PA's achievement in renewing coordination with Israel (Hussein al-Sheikh's Twitter account, November 17, 2020).

► **The PA's announcement signifies its willingness to return to the previous course of civilian and security coordination** with Israel, after relations were cut off (although not completely) almost half a year ago. The coordination involves dozens of subjects, from the daily lives and welfare of Palestinian civilians (health, water, electricity) to security coordination. It can be assumed that the return to the status quo ante will be gradual, with priority given to the urgent issues on the agenda. As a result of the decision, **the offices of the General Authority for Civil Affairs**, which is responsible for civilian coordination with

Israel, were reopened (after having been closed after Mahmoud Abbas decided to cut off ties).

► In ITIC assessment, **the three significant implications of the PA announcement are the following:**

◆ **Politically:** The PA is preparing **to rehabilitate its relations with the administration of President-Elect Joe Biden**, after the tension and friction that accompanied its relations with the Trump administration. To that end the **PA has begun waging a "smile attack"** on the incoming administration. It includes the renewal of civilian and security coordination with Israel and the return of the PA ambassadors to the UAE and Bahrain (the day after the announcement about the renewal of relations with Israel). In addition, it was leaked to the American (and Israeli) media that the **PA would be willing to examine solutions for a series of ongoing issues with Israel and the United States, including the payments to the Palestinian terrorist prisoners and the families of the shaheeds**. On the other hand, **the PA apparently also has expectations from the new American administration, mainly cancelling measures taken by the Trump administration which the Palestinians perceive as damaging**. The Palestinians apparently expect the Americans to reopen the PLO legation in Washington, restore financial aid to the PA, continue support for UNRWA, etc.)

◆ **Economically:** The renewal of coordination with Israel, in PA perception, is expected to make it possible **to receive the tax revenues Israel is holding and thereby ease the PA's financial crisis, which worsened with the Covid-19 crisis**. According to Palestinian sources, **Israel is holding about three billion shekels (about \$900 million) of Palestinian money**. Receipt of the money will enable the PA pay the salaries of government employees and the monthly allotments, thus easing the internal pressures on the PA.¹

◆ **The internal Palestinian aspect:**

- With one blow, the PA's announcement about the renewal of relations with Israel **cut off the (futile) attempts to promote the internal Palestinian reconciliation**, attempts which had accelerated in recent months. After the

¹ **Khaled al-Asili, PA minister of the economy**, said that after the transfer the tax fund to the PA, first priority will be given to paying the salaries of government employees and the payments to those who receive allotments (Filastin al-Yawm, November 19, 2020).

announcement had been made public, which occurred during reconciliation talks in Cairo between Hamas and Fatah, **the media affiliated with Hamas and the other terrorist organizations began savagely attacking the PA**. Senior Fatah figure Jibril Rajoub, who was identified with the reconciliation process, was obliged to **officially announce that the talks in Cairo had failed** (Palestinian TV, November 22, 2020).

- The return to civilian and security coordination **may be interpreted as surrender to Israel (and the United States)**. It is doubtful whether the claim of "Palestinian victory" that took the "deal of the century" off the table will be trusted by the Palestinian public, and perhaps not even by Fatah. **That might even further damage the legitimacy and poor public image of the PA and of Mahmoud Abbas himself.**

► **Will the PA agree to translate its "smile attack" into practical measures** or will it remain only a rhetorical gesture? **Will the PA change its contrarian policy towards Israel** or will it focus on political efforts to win over the United States and alienate it from Israel? Will security coordination **really return to the status quo ante** or not? At this point it is too early to evaluate how the situation will develop, however, apparently, **in PA perception, an opportunity has been created to change the hostile relations between the PA and the United States administration under Trump.**

The PA Renews Relations with Israel

The announcement from Hussein al-Sheikh

► **On November 17, 2020, Hussein al-Sheikh, a close associate of Mahmoud Abbas, announced that the PA's relations with Israel would return to the status quo ante**, i.e., before May 19, 2020, when Mahmoud Abbas announced he was cutting off relations with Israel.² Al-Sheikh added that the step was being taken following talks Mahmoud Abbas had

² On May 19, 2020, the Palestinian leadership held a meeting in Ramallah chaired by Mahmoud Abbas to discuss Israel's intention to impose its sovereignty on parts of Judea and Samaria. The meeting was attended by PA Prime Minister Muhammad Shtayyeh, members of Fatah's Central Committee and of the PLO's Executive Committee. Mahmoud Abbas said that as of May 19, 2020, the PLO and the state of Palestine had been liberated from all agreements and understandings with the governments of the United States and Israel, including security [agreements] (Wafa, May 19, 2020). The meeting was held after the Israeli Likud and Blue-White political parties announced the fundamental guidelines of the government, according to which Israel would impose its sovereignty over parts of Judea and Samaria, based on the Trump declaration and with the full agreement of the United States. For

held regarding **Israel's commitment to the agreements signed with the Palestinians**. It was based on verbal and written communications confirming Israel's commitment to the agreements (Hussein al-Sheikh's Twitter account, November 17, 2020); Wafa, November 17, 2020). Hussein al-Sheikh is a member of Fatah's Central Committee, chairman of the General Authority for Civil Affairs, and responsible for civilian coordination with Israel. He enjoys the status of minister although he is not formally a member of Muhammad Shtayyeh's government.



Hussein al-Sheikh's announcement of the return of relations with Israel to the status quo ante (Hussein al-Sheikh's Twitter account, November 17, 2020).

► Shortly after the tweet, Hussein al-Sheikh was interviewed by Palestinian TV, where **he explained the background and reasons for the decision**. His main theme was that the announcement reflected "a victory for the Palestinian people," because Israel had recognized the agreements signed with the PLO. That meant, according to Hussein al-Sheikh, that **the "deal of the century" was no longer on the table**. His main themes were the following:

- ◆ The Palestinian leadership recently sent a written communiqué to the Israeli government consisting of one question: Is the Israeli government still committed to agreements with the PLO, based on international legitimacy as source of authority? On November 17, 2020, the PA received **written confirmation from the Israeli government of its commitment to agreements signed with the PLO. Al-Sheikh claimed it was the first letter the PA had received during the Netanyahu era,**

further information, see the June 2, 2020 bulletin, "Palestinian Authority launches campaign to prevent Israeli application of its sovereignty in Judea and Samaria (updated to June 2, 2020)."

written and documented, in which the Israeli government declared its commitment to bilateral agreements with the Palestinians.³



Right: The formal letter sent by the COGAT to Hussein al-Sheikh in which Israel declares its commitment to bilateral agreements with the Palestinians, including financial agreements (Sama, November 17, 2020), Left: Muhammad Shtayyeh holds the letter during an interview with the American Council on Foreign Relations (YouTube channel of the Council on Foreign Relations, November 17, 2020).

◆ Hussein al-Sheikh praised the Palestinian "achievement" leading to the PA's agreement to renew coordination with Israel. He said the essence of the issue was not about returning relations to what they were before May 19, 2020. The most important thing, he said, was **achieving a clear political position regarding Israel's commitment to the agreements**. That meant, he claimed, "**there is no longer another plan on the table [i.e., the Trump plan]**." He stressed it was a victory for the Palestinian people and Mahmoud Abbas, reemphasizing it meant the "deal of the century" was no longer on the table.

Renewal of the Palestinian liaison offices' activities and a working meeting of PA and Israeli representatives

► On November 22, 2020, the Palestinian General Authority for Civil Affairs announced **the renewal of all its activities in all districts in Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip**, as of the morning of November 23, 2020. According to the announcement, the authority will continue

³ PA prime minister and member of Fatah's Central Committee Muhammad Shtayyeh also announced receipt of the letter from Israel and the renewal of relations with it in an interview with the Council on Foreign Relations, and independent think-tank operating in the United States (Council on Foreign Relations YouTube channel, November 17, 2020).

to deal with all civilian issues. He added that the Palestinian public is invited to appeal to the Palestinian liaison offices and not to the Israeli liaison offices. He also called on the Palestinians to avoid direct communications with Israel through the COGAT's Arabic Facebook page (Facebook page of the general authority for civilian affairs, November 22, 2020).

► Following the announcement, senior Palestinian figures told the PA-affiliated daily newspaper al-Ayam that **the Palestinian leadership had decided to agree to receive tax revenues from Israel again**, noting that the transfer would be arranged within several days. Other sources stressed that commitment to the agreements meant Israel had to immediately put an end to all its violations, especially those relating to the settlements and events in Jerusalem (al-Ayam, November 18, 2020). **PA government spokesman Ibrahim Melhem rushed to announce that representatives of the PA ministry of the treasury would meet their Israeli counterparts before the end of November to arrange the transfer of the tax revenues Israel had collected for the Palestinians, which had not been transferred for about half a year.** Asked about the PA's debts to public employees, he said that after the receipt of the funds the ministry of the treasury would determine how the debts would be paid (al-Quds, November 18, 2020).

► The Israeli media reported that **on November 19, 2020, the first meeting was held in Ramallah with Israeli representatives in attendance.** Present were COGAT General Kamil Abu Rukun, and Hussein al-Sheikh, responsible for relations with Israel (Kan 11, Walla!, November 19, 2020). According to Hussein al-Sheikh, the [existing] agreements were reconfirmed. **He added that they agreed the funds (i.e., the tax revenues) would be transferred to the PA**, and another meeting would be held (Hussein al-Sheikh's Twitter account, November 19, 2020).

Issues on the Agenda

Transfer of tax revenues and the issue of the salaries paid to terrorists prisoners

An issue especially important for the PA is the rapid transfer of the tax revenues Israel has collected to the Palestinians. That is because the PA's financial difficulties, which have worsened with the Covid-19 crisis, make it hard to pay the salaries of government employees. According to Palestinian economist J'afar Sidka, Israel holds three billion

shekels (about \$900 million), accumulated since May 2020 (al-Araby al-Jadeed, November 12, 2020).

► **The PA is aware that the payment of salaries to Palestinian terrorist prisoners is liable to be an obstacle to the return of the tax revenues, pose difficulties in renewing American aid and be a source of legal suits against the PA in the United States. Moreover, it may cause difficulties for the PA in its relations with the new American administration and Congress.** The New York Times reported that "sympathetic Democrats have repeatedly warned [the Palestinians] that without an end to the payments, it would be impossible for the new administration to do any heavy lifting on their behalf" (New York Times, November 19, 2020).

► Therefore, **the PA is currently exploring creative solutions to satisfy the new American administration.** One such solution was recently proposed by **Qadri Abu Bakr, chairman of the authority for prisoners and released prisoners.** In a telephone interview he told the New York Times that "[the] **proposal being hammered out in Ramallah would give the families of Palestinian prisoners stipends based on their financial need instead of how long they are behind bars.**" He added that "[Palestinian] officials said they also **plan to require released prisoners to take public-sector jobs.** Currently, many former prisoners are paid what amounts to monthly pensions for sitting idle." (**ITIC Note:** That would provide legitimacy for the transfer of payments to released terrorists under the guise of "salaries.") Abu Bakr noted that "**his commission had already distributed questionnaires to former prisoners about their job preferences**" (New York Times, November 19, 2020; ITIC emphasis).⁴

⁴ The Hezbollah-affiliated Lebanese daily al-Akhbar, which has often served as a pipeline for Hamas leaks, quoted "Palestinian sources" as saying **the PA had already begun making preparations to change the nature of the treatment given to the estimated 7,000 prisoners' families.** Instead of paying according to the attack carried out by the prisoner and the severity of the sentence, and sometimes to give him a military salary, **payments would be made according to his socio-economic status and the number of people he supported.** A Fatah source confirmed that preparations were being made for the changes as a condition of the return of the tax revenues and the restoration financial aid from the Americans (al-Akhbar, November 21, 2020).



Qadri Abu Bakr, chairman of the authority for prisoners and released prisoners (Facebook page of the Friends of Qadri Abu Bakr, November 19, 2020).

Financial support for terrorist prisoners, released prisoners and the families of shaheeds is firmly rooted in the Palestinian ethos. In ITIC assessment, the PA will find it difficult to make significance changes. The day after Hussein al-Sheikh's announcement, Prime Minister Shtayyeh made it clear the PA would continue making payments and supporting the families of the prisoners and shaheeds to "ensure them a life of dignity" (Sawa, November 18, 2020). Ideas for circumventing the difficulties in making the payments were proposed and implemented in the past but none of them was able to resolve the fundamental difficulty raised by paying salaries to imprisoned terrorists. **It is therefore doubtful that the PA genuinely intends to make significant changes in the payments given to the terrorists and the families of the shaheeds.**

► However, there are indications that **the PA has no real intention** of making fundamental changes in giving terrorists their generous allowances. It seems that **the PA spokesmen send contradictory messages to American and to Palestinian ears:**

◆ **Qadri Abu Bakr, chairman of the prisoners and released prisoners' authority,** gave a speech at a rally in Kafr Kobar in front of the home of Palestinian terrorist **Na'el al-Barghouti** to mark the beginning of his 42nd year in an Israeli prison.⁵ Abu Bakr claimed the existence of a "conspiracy" to harm Palestinian prisoners. However, he said, **the prisoners' cause is a "red line"** because their "rights" cannot be violated, **regardless of circumstances or pressures** (Facebook page of the Friends of Qadri Abu Bakr, November 23, 2020). On another occasion **he called for employing the**

⁵ **Na'el al-Barghouti is a Palestinian terrorist who was sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder of an Israeli civilian in 1978.** He was a Fatah operative who entered the ranks of Hamas while in an Israeli prison. He was released in the Gilad Shalit prisoner exchange deal but detained again less than three years later for violating the terms of his release and returned to prison to serve the rest of his sentence. He is considered the longest-serving terrorist operative imprisoned in an Israeli jail.

Palestinian prisoners in all the PA's institutions, in accordance with a 1994 decision by Arafat. However, he denied reports that the PA intended to pay the salaries of the prisoners through welfare agencies (Safa, November 23, 2020).



Qadri Abu Bakr speaking at a rally in Kafr Kobar at the home of terrorist prisoner Na'el al-Barghouti (Facebook page of the Friends of Qadri Abu Bakr, November 23, 2020).

◆ Even after the renewal of coordination with Israel, **the PA continues advancing the establishment of a national Palestinian bank, through which salaries will be paid to the prisoners and families of shaheeds.** On November 22, 2020 (several days after the announcement of the renewal of relations), Qadri Abu Bakr reported that **the bank would begin operations in January 2021.** The bank will belong to the PA and operate with its full authority (interview with al-Najah TV in Nablus, quoted by the Facebook page of the Friends of Qadri Abu Qadri, November 22, 2020; Sabaq24 website, November 21, 2020).

PA relations with the new American administration

► In ITIC assessment, behind the PA's announcement of the renewal of coordination is **its desire to rehabilitate relations with the new American administration.** That is also why the PA immediately announced **it would return its diplomatic representatives to Bahrain and the UAE** (Twitter account of al-Arabiya 'Ajel, November 18, 2020).

► **It is possible that the PA is examining other good-will gestures towards the new American administration, side by side with a shopping list of the favors it expects.** One indication of the PA's expectations of mutual good-will gestures was a report in the Israeli media (that might have been leaked by the PA itself). According to the report, the PA sent messages to Western diplomats stating that **it would be ready to delay joining international conventions, institutions and organizations as a gesture to the Biden administration.** In addition, the PA would be prepared **to discuss the claims of incitement**

in the textbooks used in its education system. However, the PA also made it clear **it had expectations of the new administration:** reopening the PLO consulate in Washington, DC; reopening USAID; renewing American aid to UNRWA; and upgrading the responsibilities of the American consul in Jerusalem (Kan 11 News, Israeli TV, November 20, 2020).

Appendix

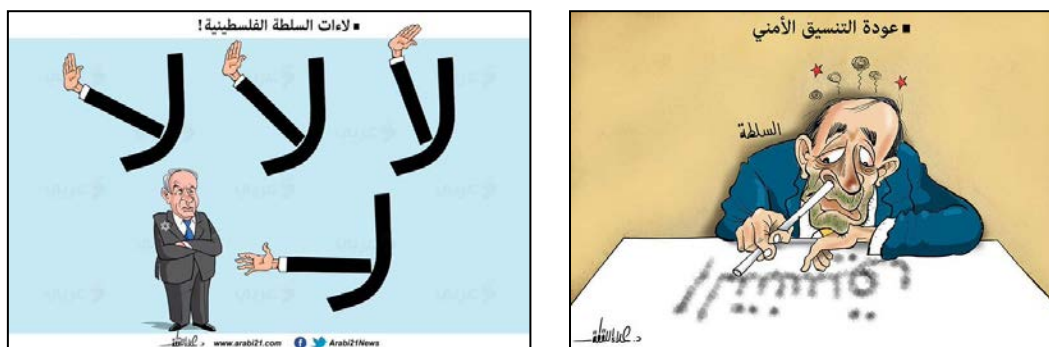
Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) reactions

Hamas

► **Hamas harshly condemned the PA's announcement of the renewal of relations with Israel**, claiming the PA had disregarded all the national Palestinian principles, as well as the results of the historic meeting of the secretaries of the Palestinian organizations. Hamas added that the PA's decision harmed national efforts to construct a partnership and strategy for the struggle to combat the [Israeli] siege, annexation, normalization and the "deal of the century." **Hamas called on the PA to reverse the decision immediately** (Palinfo, November 17, 2020).

► **Hamas spokesman Taher al-Nunu said the Hamas leadership would hold an ad hoc meeting chaired by Isma'il Haniyeh, head of Hamas' political bureau.** The aim of the meeting will be to discuss recent developments, especially the issue of the internal Palestinian reconciliation, in view of the PA's announcement to renew connections with Israel. Al-Nunu added that Hamas adhered to forging national unity based on "full partnership" and the "fundamental principles of the resistance." He said those are the principles Hamas adhered to during the meeting of the secretaries general [in Beirut], and at the meetings in Istanbul and Cairo (official Hamas website, November 20, 2020).

► **Senior Hamas figure Mahmoud al-Zahar** said the PA and the PLO had given the Palestinian organizations [which participated in the attempts to reach an internal reconciliation] a "ringing slap in the face." He claimed that in the past he had warned the Palestinian organizations not to join the PLO because it had never abandoned its way of thinking about security coordination and negotiations with the "Israeli enemy." He called on the Palestinian organizations opposing the PLO's plan to instead change their course to the "plan for liberation" based on resistance to the occupation because, he said, the PLO heads had not abandoned the idea of an arrangement [with Israel] (Shams, November 17, 2020).



Right: A cartoon drawn by Hamas-affiliated Alaa al-Laqta. The Arabic reads, "Renewal of security coordination." "Coordination" is the drug the PA uses to get high (alresala.net Twitter account, November 17, 2020). **Left:** The PA says "no." The Arabic word "no" changes to a handshake for coordination with Israel (Filastin al-A'an Twitter account, November 18, 2020).

► **Usama Hamedan, in charge of Hamas' public relations**, appealed to Fatah members opposing the PA's decision, **calling on them to act to put an end to the coordination** (al-Aqsa TV, November 20, 2020). On another occasion he claimed that the Fatah delegation to the internal Palestinian reconciliation process in Cairo, and some of the Fatah leadership, had not been informed about the announcement of the renewal of security coordination [with Israel] (al-Mayadeen, November 21, 2020).

► The following were statements from Hamas-affiliated commentators:

◆ **Fayiz Abu Shamala** (from Khan Yunis) called security coordination with Israel "betrayal of [Islam] and the homeland," and "the sellout of Palestine." He claimed Mahmoud Abbas does not believe in partnership, is not looking for reconciliation [with Hamas], and instead "is eager for joint security coordination [with Israel]" (Fayiz Abu Shamala's Twitter account, November 17, 2020).

◆ **Ibrahim al-Madhoun** (who resides in Turkey and is the director of the Association for Palestine Communicators and Media) said the renewal of relations between the PA and Israel had been expected, as was the way the announcement was made, which "disrespected the Palestinians." He said the ideal alternative would be a joint confrontation of all the Palestinians with the "occupation" (i.e., Israel) in every way possible (Palinfo, November 17, 2020).

◆ **Lamaa Tha'er** (from Hebron) condemned the PA's "embarrassing surrender." She said the PA's order of priorities was clear: "its survival is the only thing that matters" (Lamaa Tha'er's Twitter account, November 17, 2020).

The PIJ

► **The PIJ issued an announcement strongly condemning the PA for renewing its "forbidden relations,"** which harmed all the efforts for a national partnership. The PIJ called it a pact with the "occupation" (i.e., Israel), a slap in the face of Palestinian consensus and **sabotage of the efforts for an internal reconciliation.** According to the PIJ, the Palestinian people are in favor of the "resistance" and will not submit to anyone who preaches surrender or collaboration with the enemy. In addition, **the PA's conduct will make the PIJ adhere more strongly to the path of "resistance" as the only way to liberate Palestinian land and "restore the rights" [of the Palestinian people].** The PIJ called for opposition to all forms of connection with the "occupation," to denounce them and to denounce anyone who joins with them (PIJ website, November 17, 2020).

► **Da'ud Shehab, in charge of the PIJ's media information office,** said that the return to the catastrophic negotiations and relations with Israel is an expression of the policy that led the Arab states to normalization [of relations with Israel]. He said the PA, the PLO leadership and Fatah had committed a "great crime" (Shams, November 17, 2020).