

Trumps Speech, The Day After – A PASSIA Roundtable Discussion

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Participants: Nathan Thrall, Senior Analyst, International Crisis Group; Dr. Khalil Shikaki, Director of the Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR); Dr. Nasser Qudwa, Fatah Central Committee, Yassar Arafat Foundation.

Introduction by Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi (Chairman of PASSIA)

Nathan Thrall pointed out that it were mostly domestic politics that influenced US President Trump's controversial decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and that he had - despite the prior warnings to the opposite - the support of his so-called "peace team" including Jared Kushner. The speech of Trump and his announcement to intend moving the US embassy from Tel Aviv to the newly recognized "Israeli capital" left American officials confused, as in how to behave in the field and how to respond to queries about the actual significance of this move. However, the announced policy change seems already to be taking a new direction, for example, with US ambassador to Israel David Friedman attending a Hanukkah ceremony in the Old City and Vice-President Mike Pence expected to make the first formal state **visit** by a senior US official to the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

Regarding possible next steps Israel may take – encouraged by the American move – such as annexation of (parts of) the West Bank, Mr. Thrall called attention to what happened when Israel annexed the Syrian Golan Heights: Nothing. Israeli annexationists take this example to support their claims and thus there will be most likely no action against Israel whatsoever other than harsh words of condemnation and corresponding statements.

As for the situation at the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound , Thrall said that his guess was a possible increase in the number of Jews touring the Haram Ash-Sharif, but that the basic strategy would remain to "maintain the *status quo*".

With regard to the resumption of peace talks, Thrall argued that Trump's decision on Jerusalem has even removed some pressure from President Mahmoud Abbas's shoulders, as he now has good reason not to enter in the US-dictated negotiations.

Khalil Shikaki presented the main findings of his institute's most recent public opinion poll <http://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/711>, saying, in summary, that the Palestinian public feels punished, once again, and that President Abbas has never been as rejected as he is today, with some 70% of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip wanting him to resign. According to the PSR-poll, if there were **presidential elections** today, Hamas's Haniyeh would beat Abbas and most other potential candidates with the exception of jailed Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti. In parliamentary elections, Fatah would receive more votes than Hamas but far from an absolute majority.

Concerning the international community, Shikaki stressed that Palestine is no longer on top of the minds of the Arab states, it has ceased to be the top priority amidst the turmoil in the region. The Trump decision on Jerusalem has ultimately proven that the US is biased and just as right-wing as Israel, so that its role in the Middle East has received a serious blow.

Domestically, poll results indicate that concerning diplomacy and violence, there is an increase in support for armed struggle, but still no large scale support for a new intifada. The majority of the Palestinian population does neither support a two-state nor a one-state solution. The main reason why despite the recent developments there are no bigger numbers of protestors on the streets is the lack of leadership and points to the urgent need of Abbas to change the domestic position. But what then, Shikaki asked, can or should he do? Cancel Oslo? This is too risky for himself and those surrounding him and therefore very unlikely. Go to the ICC? This kind of “threat” has already been repeated way too often, so that nobody believes in it anymore. So the third option is the most likely: stay at the same course as is, with just some minor changes. This is the least costly, least risky for the PA, but will also not achieve anything big.

Nasser Qudwa began by expressing his disagreement with the result of the aforementioned PSR-poll and pointing to the very fact that Trump’s speech constitutes a grave breach of international law, which in turn is a threat to any form of political settlement. Qudwa said that Fatah has already put together some recommended measures that should be adopted by the Palestinians in response to Trump’s unilateral and illegal move (<http://www.fatehmedia.ps/page-11947.html>):

- Declaring that the US can no longer be a mediator and the old game is over. This means an end to the mechanism of the US-led framework and the need for a new mechanism.
- New international moves (UNSC,...)
- Enforcing the status of the State of Palestine (calling on states for support).
- Applying for new membership at UN and other international organizations.
- Making any way of dealing with settlers illegal for Palestinians.
- *Idem dito* for other states (e.g., by denying visas for settlers).
- Internally/domestically: working harder for real reconciliation between Fatah-Hamas, including forming a new Palestinian National Council, restructuring the PA (but never dissolving it!), and inspecting the PA-security apparatus.

Al-Qudwa said that Fatah still wants Palestinian independence and will struggle for it. He further stressed that the State of Palestine does already exist, albeit under occupation, and that it is therefore ridiculous and a waste of effort to even consider the option of a one-state solution.