

Mahmoud Abbas Cuts Off All Relations With Israel – But For How Long?

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Mahmoud Abbas has decided to cut off all relations with Israel and the United States, although a Palestinian official has said that he has not actually done so. If he actually follows through with this, it means that the one thing of value Abbas could offer the Israelis – cooperation on security – is no longer going to be forthcoming from the PA. This is the latest installment in President Abbas' made-for-television series, *How to Cut Off Your Nose To Spite Your Face*.

As is well known, following the Oslo Accords of 1993 and 1995 between Israel and the Palestinians, the West Bank was divided into three areas.

Area A constitutes 18 percent of the West Bank. The PA controls most affairs in this area, including internal security.

In Area B, which comprises about 21 percent of the West Bank, the PA controls education, health and the economy, but not internal security.

In both areas, Israeli authorities have full external security control.

This means that the Israeli military retains the right to enter these areas at any time, to raid homes where terrorists are believed to be hiding, and to arrest individuals suspected of terrorism.

Area C is the largest section of the West Bank, comprising about 60 percent of the territory.

It is also the site of the great majority of the more than 200 Jewish villages and cities in the West Bank.

While Israel has broad powers to search for terrorists in all three areas, cooperation with Abbas' security services, who have helped both in foiling plots and in locating terrorists, has proved to be surprisingly valuable.

Now, in a fit of pique over Trump's Deal of the Century, Mahmoud Abbas has shown the world just what solemn agreements mean to him. He has unilaterally ended all relations with Israel, including the security cooperation that Israel had grown to expect of him – indeed, it was the only useful thing the Israelis expected of him. Abbas was willing to cooperate in such an area because many of the terrorists owed their allegiance to his arch-rival, Hamas, or to other terrorist groups; they were political enemies of Mahmoud Abbas. He had, then, his own good and sufficient reasons for agreeing to work with Israel on security matters. But in his current rage over the Trump peace plan, he's decided to end even that

collaboration, one that benefited both him and Israel.

Israelis – and others who are paying attention – will have learned yet again from Abbas's latest move that the solemn agreements made by Muslim leaders with their non-Muslim counterparts are breached at will by those same Muslim leaders whenever they feel like it. Their model of treaty-making is that made by Muhammad with the Meccans in 628 A.D. at Hudaibiyya. That "truce" treaty was supposed to last for ten years, but after only 18 months Muhammad felt that his side was sufficiently strong to take on the Meccans, and he attacked them. That Treaty of Hudaibiyya, and its breach by the Muslim side, has been the model for Muslims to follow for 1,400 years. Pacta sunt servanda – "treaties are to be obeyed" – is a Western, not an Islamic concept.

Israel could, of course, do nothing at this point, except hope that common sense will return to Mahmoud Abbas, who will recognize the benefit he receives from security coordination with Israel. But a more aggressive policy, of answering Abbas tit for tat, might be more effective. We have a recent example where Israel's tougher line paid off, with Palestinian defiance turning into Palestinian capitulation.

As is well known, Israel continues to collect, on behalf of the Palestinian Authority, taxes from the earnings of Palestinian day laborers in Israel, from merchants who live in Palestinian territory but do business in Israel, and from customs duties on Palestinian imports that arrive first at, and are collected by, Israel. For years Israel implored the PA to stop sending money to imprisoned terrorists, or to the families of terrorists who had been killed. The PA ignored Israel's requests. Finally, starting in July 2019, Israel tried something new. It began to deduct from the taxes to be transferred to the Palestinian Authority (PA) the precise amount that the PA contributed to terrorists and their families in what has become known as the Pay-For-Slay program. The amounts were considerable— about \$140 million was

contributed by the PA's "Martyr's Fund" to terrorists and their families in 2018, and a similar amount in 2019.

In July 2019, Israel began deducting those same Pay-For-Slay amounts from the taxes to be transferred. Mahmoud Abbas defiantly vowed that he would refuse to accept any transferred tax money from Israel if the Israelis deducted any amount from the total because of the Pay-For-Slay payments – which Abbas described in quite different and glowing terms, as money from the "Martyr's Fund." Over several months, Israel continued to offer Abbas the taxes collected, minus the amounts the PA was giving to terrorists and their families. Abbas defiantly, noisily refused – for several months. But finally, Mahmoud Abbas quietly capitulated – that tax money proved just too important to the PA's finances – and he agreed to accept the Israeli transfers of taxes, minus the amounts deducted by Israel that were equal to the Pay-For-Slay payments by the PA.

That capitulation is worth remembering today, as Mahmoud Abbas continues to labor under the delusion that he can "punish" Israel by cutting off all security ties, and that there is nothing Israel can do in return. There are many things Israel can do in return. It can continue to collect those taxes on behalf of the PA, but refuse to transfer any of the moneys collected, which would instead be placed in escrow accounts, and transferred only when Abbas reinstates the previous security collaboration between the PA security services and the Israelis.

Israel can also cut back on the employment of Palestinians from the West Bank both in Israel and in the Jewish towns and cities in the West Bank. This would deprive the PA of an important source of revenue, and raise the already high level of Palestinian unemployment even higher. Palestinian merchants living in the West Bank but now doing business in Israel could see their business dealings inside Israel suffer, if the Israelis choose to limit their travel to and from the Jewish state. Israel could justify cutting back both on Palestinian

laborers and businessmen entering Israel from PA-controlled areas of the West Bank as a measure necessitated by the ending of security cooperation with the PA, and that such restrictions would be lifted as soon as the security cooperation with Israel is reinstated by Abbas.

There are many other measures Israel can take to pressure Abbas. The Israelis, who supply the Palestinians with almost all of their electricity, can shut it off for as long as they want. Last September, Israel shut off electricity to the PA for several hours every day, because the Jerusalem District Electricity Co., a Palestinian distributor of electricity, still had an unpaid bill of \$485 million. Israel could, if it wished, cut back the electricity delivered to the PA for much longer periods, day or night, and Mahmoud Abbas knows it. Such a dramatic reduction in the amount of electricity provided to the West Bank and Gaza would play havoc with businesses subject to sudden cuts in service (as, for example, restaurants and grocery stores) and also make the lives of ordinary citizens more difficult by interrupting, or preventing altogether, the use of domestic appliances and electric lights.

It is the same with water. Israel [now supplies](#) most of the water resources on which the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza rely. Interruptions in that supply would certainly get Mahmoud Abbas' attention.

And what will the PA leaders do for air travel if Israel takes a tougher line in response to Abbas cutting off all security collaboration with Israel? There are no working airports in either PA-ruled parts of the West Bank, or in Hamas-ruled Gaza. In the West Bank, there is Mugeible Airfield in Jenin, which has been defunct since the late 1940s. There is Jerusalem Atarot Airport Ramallah, not in use since 2000. In the Gaza Strip there is the Gush Katif Airport in Khan Yunis, defunct since 2004. And there is the grandly-named white elephant, Yasser Arafat International Airport, which has been

defunct since 2004. Into and out of what airport in Israel does Mahmoud Abbas plan on flying his \$50 million dollar private jet? The Israelis may no longer be quite so accommodating. Perhaps they will prevent the Palestinians altogether from arriving at, or departing from, airports in Israel, again justifying this ban on security grounds.

These are a few of the actions the Jewish state could take to persuade Mahmoud Abbas to reinstate his security collaboration with Israel. Abbas, one suspects, will silently return the PA to its previous collaboration with Israeli security. He doesn't have a choice, given what Israel can do to him. Those measures see above for details – on taxes withheld, employment and business opportunities for Palestinians curtailed, electricity and water supplies subject to severe disruption – should be enough. They should be more than enough. Let's see how long Mahmoud Abbas can continue his tantrum, before he does as he did with Israel's Pay For Slay deductions from the taxes it transferred to the PA, which is to say, capitulates.

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