

US-Palestinian Relations: The Strange Issue of the PLO's Washington Office

The Trump administration cannot talk about a historic agreement, and then allow the Netanyahu government to continue with its colonisation project

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In late September this year, the State of Palestine was accepted as a member of the International Criminal Police Organisation (Interpol) and a member of the International Criminal Court (ICC). Immediately, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu moved "to discuss a plan with the administration of US President Donald Trump and members of the Congress to pressure the Palestinians and stop their unilateral actions in the international arena with the aim of disrupting the trial of Israeli officials in international courts and even moving towards the closure of the PLO [Palestine Liberation Organisation] office in Washington" (which Palestinians call an embassy) unless they stop taking such "unilateral" actions! According to the state-owned KAN Israeli television: "The plan to close down the PLO office was discussed during Netanyahu's meeting with David Friedman, the US Ambassador to Tel Aviv, the American envoy Gibson Greenblatt and Israeli Ambassador to the US, Ron Dremer."

In 1994, the United States had allowed the PLO (as the official representative of all Palestinians) to open an office in Washington. Former US president Bill Clinton had waived a law that required renewal of certification every six months. In December 2015, the US Congress passed a law imposing conditions on the PLO office, stipulating that the organisation cannot run its office if it pursues prosecution of Israeli officials in the ICC on crimes against the Palestinians. Trump administration used this law to blackmail the Palestinian side, informing the PLO that its office will be closed, citing statements by Palestinian officials pledging to prosecute Israel at the International Criminal Court. A week after this decision, the US State Department notified the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) that it didn't plan to recertify its office in Washington, unless the PNA resumes peace negotiations with Israel and halt moves to prosecute Israeli officials.

"While we all know that the US administration cannot be a fair mediator between Palestinians and Israelis, the Trump administration persists in being unjust." -Professor As'ad Abdul Rahman

The Trump administration is the first since the 1993 Oslo agreements, which has not explicitly stated that the achievement of peace is based on the two-state solution and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the 1967 Palestinian Territories (with occupied East Jerusalem as its capital), and did not even care to explicitly condemn Jewish colonisation drive. Saeb Erekat, the Secretary of the PLO, has referred to "27 draft

resolutions in the US Congress to punish the Palestinian people, foremost of which is cutting aid to the Palestinian people, halting certification of the PLO office and moving the American Embassy to occupied Jerusalem. Though, the American extortion is not new in principle, since it was practised by former American administrations against the Palestinians, yet the new development is that the Trump administration did not hesitate to declare its real purpose behind this step. The American intention is to force the Palestinian leadership to return to the negotiating table with Israel according to Israeli conditions, on top of which is avoiding to freeze Jewish colonisation of Palestinian lands by building colonies.

In fact, a few weeks ago, the Foreign Relations Committee in Washington passed a bill that would stop \$300 million (Dh1.10 billion) in annual aid from the US to the PNA, “unless it stops spending what the bill described as money that rewards perpetrators of acts of violence against Israeli and American citizens”. In a parallel move, 16 Republican and Democratic members of the Committee have asked the US Ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, to “lead international efforts so that other countries take similar actions”. It is known that the US provides \$500 million to the PNA annually, and if the legislation becomes effective, the PNA will be granted only \$60 million, which is originally earmarked for security coordination with the Israeli occupation authorities.

It is strange that while the US recognises the PLO, it still classifies the organisation as a terrorist group. When Democrats formed a majority in Congress during previous administrations, the six-month waiver, allowing the PLO office to remain open, was brought up at times without taking effect. The White House administrations that link their moves to the country’s higher interests used to show some understanding earlier on. However, nowadays, the Congress, with a Republican majority, is more dominated by Zionist forces, which increased its antagonism towards the PLO. The present White House administration, regardless of the Congress animosity, receives and negotiates with the Palestinian official leadership, while taking a hard-line position towards it. While we all know that the American administration cannot be a fair mediator between Palestinians and Israelis, the Trump administration persists in being unjust. The world can see that the Palestinians always demonstrate their readiness to engage in serious negotiations to achieve peace on the basis of a two-state solution, while Israel hinders efforts towards such a goal. So, it is Israel that should be punished and not the Palestinians. In this context, the recent testimony provided by former US secretary of state John Kerry attests to such facts.

It is remarkable that recent American actions, such as the recognition of occupied Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, are inconsistent with what Trump is talking about to achieve the “Deal of the Century”. Therefore, the entire American-Palestinian relationship must be reconsidered. Trump cannot talk about a historic agreement, and then indulge in political blackmailing of the Palestinians, even as the Netanyahu government continues with its nefarious acts such as land theft and colonisation, ethnic displacement and systematic repression of Palestinians.

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