In the final days of 2021 Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian National Authority visited Benny Gantz, Israel’s Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense at his home in Rosh Ha’ayin. The previous meeting between the two men had taken place in August, in Ramallah, following which Israel announced a series of “confidence-building measures”.

The meeting on December 28 was remarkable - and not just because it took place years after the last round of talks between the Palestinians and Israelis, and President Abbas’ last visit to Israel in 2014. And not just because it took place, not in an official government building in either Israel or the west Bank, and not in a capital city or regional capital, but in the private home of the Israeli minister. Both the meeting in December, and the previous one in August, departed from the normal pattern for such events in that, according to the official statements, there was no reference to the “peace process” or the “Abraham Accords”. The overall goal of the meetings was to establish guidelines for negotiations on the threat posed to Israeli security by those Palestinians who believe that violence is necessary in order to bring an end to the Israeli occupation, and on the violence used by those Israeli settlers who insist on their right not only to continue occupying Palestinian land but also to evict the Palestinians from that land. In preliminary talks of this kind, it is essential to create a climate that can enable further progress to be made. Unfortunately, that is precisely what Abbas and Gantz were unable to do - not because of any personal failings on either side, but because both of them are faced with insoluble problems which deprive them of any freedom to make concessions.
As a member of the largest parliamentary coalition in Israel’s history, Gantz has his hands tied. The only thing holding the coalition together is a shared determination not to give Benjamin Netanyahu a chance to return to power. Naftali Bennett, the current Prime Minister, is a hardliner who is absolutely opposed to allowing the Palestinians to form any kind of state, let alone an independent state with the pre-June 1967 borders and its capital in East Jerusalem. Mahmoud Abbas, on the other hand, is both President of the Palestinian National Authority, which is recognized as the only legitimate Palestinian government authority in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and head of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, generally recognized as the only legitimate body representing the Palestinian people. But in reality Hamas rebelled against the PLO more than 15 years ago and took control over the Gaza Strip. Hamas also insisted that it has a right to veto any initiatives taken by the Palestinian government, just as Hezbollah did with the Lebanese government. In both cases the official government lacks a key element of political power - a monopoly on the legal use of armed force.

As a result of the above circumstances, neither Abbas nor Gantz had much leeway in their meetings. It is possible that the meaning of the talks was best expressed by Hussein al-Sheikh, the Palestinian press secretary and head of the General Authority of Civil Affairs, who described the purpose of the meeting as to “create a political horizon” allowing the parties to reach a political solution based on international law and UN resolutions. No such comments were offered by the Israeli side. Instead they talked about a number of measures to strengthen confidence, such as cooperation in the area of security, the granting of permission for 6,000 Palestinians who are currently living on the West Bank to live in Jerusalem, and permits allowing another 3,600 to work in Israel.

That may not appear to be much of an achievement. Some might argue that these results are not enough to justify these high-level meetings, and could have been agreed through usual diplomatic channels. But it is clear that these meetings count for more than just the sum of their parts. That is clear from the angry reactions from the negotiators’ political opponents on both sides. In Palestine, Hamas and its supporters, unsurprisingly, condemned the meeting as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause and of its martyrs, and a stab in the back for the intifada, which, they claim, was on the brink of victory. And in Israel, the Netanyahu camp have described the meeting as a direct threat to Israel’s security. These angry reactions can be explained, at least in part, by the fact that the meeting and its results are more significant than they appear at first, forming part of a wider process.

On December 14 the US Department of State announced the renewal of the US-Palestinian Economic Dialogue (USPED) after a hiatus of five years. The last USPED meeting took place in 2016. According to the official announcement by the US Department of State, published on its website, “participants recognized the importance of restored political and economic relations between the US government and the Palestinian National Authority and pledged to expand and deepen cooperation and coordination across a range of sectors”. The US delegation included many high-ranking diplomats and senior budget and finance officials. It was headed by Yael Lempert, Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, who, speaking in a video conference, told her Palestinian counterpart that the Biden-Harris administration believes that the Palestinian people deserve to live in “freedom, security, and prosperity”.

This combination of events is not just a coincidence. A new approach to the resolution of the Palestinian issue is being developed. It is based on learning from the failures of the Trump administration’s ill-conceived initiative, which caused a rift in relations between the US and Palestine. Shortly after that the fourth war on the Gaza Strip broke out, leaving the peace process at a standstill. That war was in reality part of an attempt by Hamas to seize power in Palestine. The Palestinian National Authority’s peace process is primarily aimed at preventing further bloodshed among the Palestinian population living in the region. For the Palestinians, the only concrete achievement of the Oslo Accords was their continued presence in Palestine as a people with their own governing authority. But achievements of that kind are only possible by excluding extremism of the kind favored by Hamas - which is making life much more difficult for the Palestinians living in Palestine and is having the effect of subjecting those living in Israel to various forms of “Israelization”. It is also important to bear in mind that the policies followed by the Palestinian authorities in the past have contributed to the growth of Hamas, which in turn has undermined support for the Palestinian peace process among the various Arab states and many international organizations.

Israel’s policies have also done little to improve relations with the Palestinians - for example in recent years Israeli special forces have been trying to evict the Palestinian population from Sheikh Jarrah (East Jerusalem). A delegation of EU officials led by the head of the EU mission Sven Kuhn von Burgsdorff even visited the region to prevent families from being evicted from their homes. Following the visit, the head of the EU commented on the situation via his official Twitter account: “It is imperative to deescalate the situation and seek a peaceful resolution. Evictions/demolitions are illegal under international law and significantly undermine the prospects for peace as well as fuel tensions on the ground.” Also via Twitter, the British Consul in Jerusalem expressed concern, speaking out in
support of the Palestinian residents and stressing that the Israeli actions were against international law: “Evictions in Occupied Territory are against international humanitarian law in all but the most exceptional circumstances. The United Kingdom urges the Government of Israel to cease such practices which only serve to increase tensions on the ground.”

Significantly, given the current state of relations between Palestine and Israel, the demographic factor is becoming increasingly important. Because of high birth rates, the number of Palestinians in Israel, as a proportion of the whole population, is increasing year by year. That is forcing the Israeli authorities to consider what a decision on the creation of a unified state might look like, and how to include the Palestinian and Arab-Israeli populations in a comprehensive peace process able to serve as an alternative to the racist forces operating within Israel and pave the way to new relations between two peoples.

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