



ISRAEL NEWS
A collection of the week's news from Israel
From the Bet El Twinning / Israel Action Committee of
Beth Avraham Yoseph of Toronto Congregation

**Palestinian 'Return
March' Is Yet
Another Futile
Publicity Stunt**

By Yoni Ben Menachem

Hamas has adopted a new method of fighting Israel by using civilians in the same way it did during Operation Protective Edge in 2014 — as human shields.

The "Return March" planned for Friday is a cynical exploitation of Palestinian refugees and a publicity stunt that has no political benefit.

The refugee problem can only be solved through diplomatic means by a body representing the Palestinians that recognizes Israel's right to exist — not through a terrorist organization that wants to destroy it.

Even if Hamas makes a huge media impact with its march, within a few weeks it will disappear into a cloud of oblivion.

The military wing of Hamas began a "defense exercise" on March 25 in the Gaza Strip. Sources in Gaza say it is a show of strength in preparation for the large "Return March," which is supposed to take place between Land Day on March 30 and Nakba Day on May 15.

According to these sources, the exercise sends a double message. On the one hand, it is a message to residents of Gaza wanting to participate in the march that there is someone who will defend them from the Israel Defense Forces. On the other hand, it is a deterrent message to the IDF that harming the marchers will lead to a security escalation. This war could then spread to the borders with the State of Israel, and not be confined only to the Gaza Strip.

The march of a mass of Palestinians towards the border with Israel is not a Palestinian invention. It was first invented by Hezbollah, who tried it on Israel's northern borders on Nakba Day on May 15, 2011.

During that six-hour event, several hundred young Palestinian men and women tried to cross the Lebanese and Syrian borders with Israel. The IDF soldiers at the border were taken by surprise and compelled to open fire. As a result, 10 demonstrators were killed and another 100 were injured.

Now, Hamas is attempting to replicate Hezbollah's exercise and turn this into an event that will last several weeks. Its basic premise is that the

large media presence on the Palestinian side will provide enough protection for the Palestinian marchers to overcome the "fear barrier," approach the border fence with Israel, and try to cross it.

In Hamas' estimation, IDF soldiers will act with great caution and won't use live ammunition due to the media presence among the marchers.

No country in the world would agree to tens of thousands of demonstrators, accompanied by various kinds of media, infiltrating their borders and trying to get into their territory. Hamas is making cynical use of Palestinian refugees living in the Gaza Strip as cannon fodder against the IDF, who have to protect the border fence and cannot allow infiltration.

According to a report by the Quds Press news agency on March 7, one of the activists involved in the media campaign for the return march is Zaher al-Birawi. He is an activist affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, who also bears the title "liaison for the international committee for breaking the embargo on the Gaza Strip." In the past, he held a key position among the organizers of marches and flotillas to Gaza.

The planned "Return March" is similar to the incident of the Mavi Marmara flotilla in 2010, which was organized by Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Fatah sources in Gaza report that Hamas is encouraging residents to go to the area of the border with Israel and take part in marches toward the fence. Several Hamas activists have even promised payment for participating in these activities.

According to these sources, Hamas is interested in provoking an escalation that will lead to many casualties on the Palestinian side in order to place the Palestinian issue firmly on the top of the world agenda.

The avowed purpose of the "grand return march" is to show that the Palestinians have not given up on the "right of return" for Palestinian refugees or "houses and property" as defined by UN Resolution 194.

The organizers claim that the Palestinian initiative was provoked by US President Donald Trump's cuts to UNRWA's budget and reports that the current US administration will recommend in a final status agreement that refugees will settle in the places where they currently live — in other

Events...

Monday, April 9, 8pm

Hasbara Fellowships presents "Stopping Iran's Pathways: What it means for Israel and the global pro-Israel movement" featuring Mark Dubowitz and Linda Frum, at BAYT.

Wednesday, April 18, 6:30pm

Mizrachi's annual Yom Hazikaron Commemoration and Yom Haatzmaut Celebration with John Baird, at BAYT.

Commentary...

Israel Couldn't Have Hoped For Better By Abraham Ben-Zvi

At first glance, John Bolton's appointment to replace Gen. H.R. McMaster as U.S. President Donald Trump's National Security Adviser does not, in and of itself, indicate a dramatic shift in America's strategic global policies. To be sure, despite their different styles, McMaster and Bolton alike are fundamentally hawkish in nature, and their objections to the current nuclear deal with Iran have been decisive and comprehensive.

Bolton, who appears perpetually eager for a fight, is particularly willing to use military force, chiefly for the purpose of ending Tehran's dream of acquiring a nuclear bomb (and Pyongyang's as well). He applies this same hardline, uncompromising approach to countering the dangers posed by the various Middle Eastern emissaries of radical Islam.

However, despite the similarities to his predecessor McMaster, Bolton's appointment points toward a change, especially from Israel's perspective. Indeed, within a span of just one week, Trump has reshaped his triumvirate of top diplomatic-security advisers. Two of these advisers (excluding Defense Secretary James Mattis) already think alike about Israel. The two in question, of course, are Bolton and newly appointed Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, the former head of the CIA, who replaces Rex Tillerson. Bolton and Pompeo view Israel through the same lens, seeing it not just as a vital strategic asset and an anchor of stability in an environment rife with violence and upheaval, but as a faithful and loyal partner in an ideological sense.

Thus, while the ousted McMaster's support for Israel stemmed solely from calculated security and defense considerations (and Tillerson was reticent toward the Netanyahu government), their replacements form a new type of troika. Unlike their respective predecessors, Bolton and Pompeo bring a highly principled dimension to their jobs, predicated on the recognition that both societies and cultures share a similar destiny, constitutive ethos, national legacy and vision.

These two avowed champions of the special relationship with Israel and its role in the decision-making process are expected to dominate Trump's inner circle and will likely render the final holdover from the president's inaugural appointments, Mattis, a lone minority voice.

Mattis, who doesn't view Israel with extraordinary empathy or fondness — much like McMaster — bases his approach to the Jewish state on its strategic contribution to the United States. We should note that in the Iranian sphere, too, the cautious, reserved Mattis will likely find himself exposed in short order against the more hawkish and proactive line espoused by Bolton and Pompeo.

This new alignment, it goes without saying, will significantly impact the fate of the nuclear deal with Iran, which we could see as early as May. In any case, from Israel's perspective, these personnel changes are expected to provide an immanently crucial security blanket against any impending challenge. (Israel Hayom Mar 25)

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Arab countries.

Even if Hamas succeeds in attracting the attention of the world's media by fomenting an escalation at the border with Gaza, it is clear that this move will have no political benefit.

According to Palestinian data, there are around seven million Palestinian refugees around the world. Israel will not destroy its own national identity by absorbing the Palestinians within its boundaries as they demand, changing Israel's demographic map.

Their problem needs to be solved with the cooperation of the international community. Tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees marching to the Gaza border will not solve the problem. If anything, it will only frighten the Israel public and discourage any attempt to resolve the refugee issue.

The Hamas march actually disregards the fate of Palestinian refugees. Hamas does not have any real ability to get them across the border into Israeli territory. The IDF will prevent this, and even if a few individuals do manage to cross the border, they will either be injured or arrested.

How long can thousands of Palestinian residents live in tents close to the border fence without proper infrastructure or food? In the end, will they understand that Hamas is using them for its own political purposes?

Conditions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, coupled with the regional and international situation, are not currently conducive to finding a solution to the Palestinian refugee problem, and neither marches nor parades will help.

It's a shame about all the blood that may be spilled. It's an irresponsible move by a terror organization that has no scruples about using the residents of Gaza as "human shields" during a time of war, as it did during Operation Protective Edge in 2014.

Hamas is trying to adopt a new strategy of using civilians to fight against Israel. It calls it a "non-violent popular struggle," similar to Mahmoud Abbas' strategy in the West Bank, which he refers to as "popular, peaceful resistance."

Both of these strategies are bound to fail and they have no bearing on a solution for the problems of the Palestinian people. (Algemeiner Mar 28)

The writer, a veteran Arab affairs and diplomatic commentator for Israel Radio and Television, is a senior Middle East analyst for the Jerusalem Center. He served as Director General and Chief Editor of the Israel Broadcasting Authority.

The Palestinian Way of War: Gaza's March of Return By Hillel Frisch

Hamas supporters take part in a rally celebrating the 30th anniversary of the group's founding in Gaza City on Dec. 14, 2017. Photo: Reuters / Mohammed Salem.

Ever since Fatah committed its first act of sabotage against a pipeline of the National Water Carrier on January 1, 1965, the Palestinian national movement has waged a constant war against Israel.

At the most basic level, Palestinians and others have been consistently urged for decades by all Palestinian entities and organizations — from the PLO and PA through Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Salafi organizations — to kill or maim Israeli Jews and damage or destroy their property.

These organizations only disagree over the tactics used to achieve these objectives.

Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority (or the Palestinian State, as it appears in its logos and correspondence) is constrained by the necessity to achieve these objectives through "popular struggle" — in other words, through sticks, stones, and incendiary bombs. The PA's tactics ostensibly exclude firearms, suicide bombings, and missiles.

The other organizations have no such restraints, including Fatah, the organization that Abbas heads in addition to the PLO and the PA. These organizations' only limitations are their capabilities. In the West Bank, these capabilities are very low thanks to Israeli intelligence, preventative arrests, and security cooperation with the PA (the PA shares an interest in destroying Hamas, a common enemy).

As experts in the production of violence, these Palestinian entities and organizations know that the "routine" production of violence through "armed" and "popular" struggle is insufficient, not only for the achievement of meaningful political objectives such as Israeli withdrawals, but also for enjoying the international media limelight in the battle to delegitimize the Jewish state.

To put it bluntly, the killings of two fathers of large families and the severe maiming of two Israelis in outbreaks of Palestinian violence in January and February 2018 did not make headlines beyond the Israeli and Palestinian media. This level of impact cannot change the balance of power between the two sides.

As painful as these attacks were, few Israelis, whether on the right, the center, or the left, will be swayed by them to change their opinions on the Palestinian issue or those in power.

For their part, the Palestinians are painfully aware that ever since the

so-called Arab Spring, its bloody aftermath, and the multiplication of Iranian-Saudi and Shiite-Sunni proxy wars, the threshold of killings and maimings that they must achieve to enjoy the limelight has become appreciably higher.

Palestinian organizations compete with the Russians and Syrians in their indiscriminate air bombings of Ghouta, the area that covers the eastern suburbs of Damascus, as well as — to a decreasing extent — the violence in Iraq, Yemen, and Libya.

This is why tens — if not hundreds — of members of these organizations consistently try to come up with new ways to start waves of violence that, if frequent enough, will undermine the Israeli will to maintain a democratic state in a region constantly on the brink of war.

The latest innovation is the idea of a massive procession of 100,000 Gazans with the objective of storming the Israel security fence around the Strip to signify the return of Gaza's refugees to their original homes. Needless to say, the protesters will hardly be the original refugees, who would have to be at least 69 years old — the time elapsed since the establishment of Israel in 1948.

The immediate objective of the prospective fence-stormers is not so much to kill Israelis (though if that can be achieved, even better), but to get killed themselves. Their hope is that Israel will resort to force to protect the border (as would any sovereign state), and thereby create the graphics and funerals that delegitimize Israel.

The long-term objective of the event is, in fact, to kill and maim Israelis and damage their property. Hamas and other factions are hoping there will be mass waves of violent protest and self-initiated suicide terrorist acts in the West Bank and among Israel's Arab citizens. Ideally, from the perspective of the Palestinian organizations, it will yield a full-scale intifada.

Even in the best of times, one cannot predict what will happen. The questions of why and how to rebel are studied closely by status quo powers, by rebels and terrorists, and of course by many academics. After a hundred years of study, the triggers of sustained mass waves of violence remain largely a mystery. They do not fit into the neat formulas that characterize the exact sciences.

Israel wants to maintain the status quo in which people go about their lives peacefully. The Palestinian terrorist organizations want to change the status quo. Gaza, after eleven years of Hamas rule, is meant to become another Ghouta, another bloody Baghdad, or even another full-fledged failed Palestinian state.

This project is fraught with difficulty because the Palestinians are divided, even more so after the attempted assassination of PA Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah in Gaza. They are so divided that the major actors — the PA and Fatah on the one hand, and Hamas and Islamic Jihad on the other — can't even agree on a date for the attempt to storm the fence.

Fatah supporters want it to be held on May 14, the date on which Ben-Gurion declared the State of Israel and five Arab states invaded it in 1948. The Palestinians have appropriated that date for commemoration of the Nakba — the failure of the Palestinians to destroy the state of Israel — and the plight of the refugees — though the exit of Palestinian refugees had little to do with that particular date. Hamas wants to stage the event on March 30, on which many Israeli Arabs commemorate Land Day.

There is a good chance that marches will take place on both dates, and Israel and the Palestinians are preparing assiduously. The Israeli army will do everything it can to thwart the protestors in ways that avoid bloodshed. The Palestinian organizations, from the PLO and the PA downward, want blood to be shed.

Hopefully, Israeli intentions will prevail. (Algemeiner Mar 28)
The writer is a professor of political studies and Middle East studies at Bar-Ilan University and a senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies.

Demographic Time Bomb? Mistaken or Misleading

By Yoram Ettinger

The "demographic time bomb" concept accords mythical standards to Arab fertility and European standards to Jewish fertility, ignoring the Westernization of Arab fertility and the surging secular Jewish fertility, while significantly underestimating the potential of Jewish immigration (aliyah) to Israel, which has been steady and continuous since 1882.

In March 1898, the leading Jewish demographer historian, Shimon Dubnov, published a demographic projection, aiming to dissuade Theodor Herzl from the vision of the reconstruction of the Jewish State in the Land of Israel: "in 1998, there will be only half a million Jews in the Land of Israel. ... Political Zionism is wishful-thinking." Herzl was not deterred, although there was a meager 9 percent Jewish minority in the combined area of Judea, Samaria and pre-1967 Israel.

In October 1944, Professor Roberto Bachi, the founder of Israel's

Central Bureau of Statistics, published a demographic projection, intending to convince Israel's founding father, David Ben-Gurion, that a population of then 600,000 Jews was not a critical mass for the re-establishment of the Jewish state: "In 2001, there will be, under the best case scenario, 2.3 [million] Jews, a 34% minority..." Ben-Gurion proceeded to re-establish the Jewish state despite the mere 55 percent Jewish majority in the area partitioned for it, and the 39 percent Jewish minority in the combined area of Judea, Samaria and pre-1967 Israel.

In 1946, Ben-Gurion published Israel Trivus document, No Arab Majority in the Land of Israel, which exposed substantial deficiencies in the population censuses conducted by the British Mandate in 1922 and 1931, similar to the deficiencies of the contemporary Palestinian census: the inclusion of overseas residents in the census; the double-count of people moving from rural areas to urban centers; the inflation of numbers by clan leaders for political and economic reasons; the under-reporting of deaths. A June 10, 1993 document of Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics noted that according to Palestinian reporting, Palestinian life expectancy, supposedly, exceeded life expectancy in the USA.

In 2018, Israel is the sole Western democracy and modern economy that benefits from a tailwind of fertility and net migration, providing for sustained economic growth with minimal foreign labor. Thus, in 2016, in defiance of the "demographic time bomb" concept, and for the first time ever, the Jewish fertility rate (3.16 births per woman) exceeded the Arab fertility rate (3.11). Notwithstanding the mild decline of the ultra-Orthodox fertility rate, there was a surge in the number of Jewish births from 80,400 in 1995 to 140,000 in 2017, while the number of Arab births rose mildly from 36,000 to 43,500. The share of Jewish births out of total births was 69 percent in 1995, rising to 76.5 percent in 2017, reflecting the rise of Jewish optimism, patriotism, attachment to roots, collective responsibility and the significant decline in the number of abortions.

In 2018, the fertility rates in the Muslim world (except for the Sub-Saharan region) are substantially Westernized due to urbanization (e.g., from a 70 percent rural society, the Palestinian Authority evolved into a 75 percent urban society), integration of women into the labor and education systems (completing high school and increasingly enrolling in colleges and universities), the surge of wedding age above 20, a decline of teen pregnancy and a dramatic expansion of the use of contraceptives. For example, Iran and Saudi Arabia feature two births per woman; Egypt, 3.6; Jordan, 3.2; and the Palestinian Authority, three births per woman.

In 2018, in Israel, there are 7 million Jews, along with 130,000 Druze, 130,000 Christian Arabs and 1.6 million Muslims, in addition to 1.85 million Arabs in Judea and Samaria. The 65.5 percent Jewish majority, in the combined area of Judea, Samaria and pre-1967 Israel, benefits from a tailwind of fertility — mostly because of the secular sector — and a potential wave of aliyah of hundreds of thousands of Jews (requiring the reinstatement of a pro-active aliyah policy by the Israeli government) from France, Germany, additional European countries, Russia, the Ukraine, Moldova, Argentina and Britain.

Israel's demographic surge, quantitatively and qualitatively, is bolstering the size of its future classes of military recruits and the labor force, which enhances reality-based optimism, militarily and economically. It also feeds a demographically confident national security policy since there is no lethal demographic threat, which could lead to a retreat from geography (the mountain ridges of Judea and Samaria) in order to save demography.

The concept that Israel is, ostensibly, facing a demographic time bomb is either dramatically mistaken or outrageously misleading.

(Algemeiner Mar 28)

It's Time for a Change By Ron Prozor

While the anti-Israel bias in the United Nations and its institutions is well-known, there is no entity in which it is more obvious than in what is called the Human Rights Council — which does exactly the opposite of what its name implies. The events of this past weekend prove that the council has lost not only its legitimacy but also its right to exist. Does anyone really think that the council — whose members include Afghanistan, Angola, Cuba, Venezuela, and Qatar — will demonstrate any obligation to human rights? The council's bias starts from what is written in its very agenda. While human rights violations throughout the world are addressed under Article 4, a unique article has been devoted to Israel — Article 7 — which require the council to discuss the only democracy in the Middle East every year.

This weekend, the Human Rights Council convened once again for its regular anti-Israel discussion and accordingly passed five resolutions against Israel, while countries like Iran, Syria, and North Korea were the subjects of only one resolution each.

If anyone needed proof that the council is detached from reality and has nothing to do with human rights, it came in the form of a council resolution on human rights violations in what it called the "occupied Syrian Golan

Heights." It appears that the denizens of Geneva cafes believe that the residents of the Golan Heights had it better under the rule of a government that slaughters its citizens and uses chemical weapons against them than under a government that provides the citizens of an enemy regime with medical care and humanitarian aid.

It's time to put an end to the farce that is the United Nations Human Rights Council. The response of U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Nikki Haley to the council's recent decisions and her characterization of the council as "foolish and unworthy of its name" shows that the U.S. is losing patience. The Trump administration's record on the U.N. has shown that he doesn't only make threats — he also follows through and punishes U.N. organizations that take action against the U.S., its values, and its allies.

The Trump administration cut \$65 million from the budget of the U.N. Relief and Works Agency. The U.S. and the nations of Europe must stand up and take action. They must cease to be a fig leaf that conceals the council's sins, leave the HRC to those who violate those rights, and establish a new body that will implement the U.N.'s original mandate in the spirit of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, an organization that will hold human rights sacred rather than trampling them.

The writer is head of the Abba Eban Chair of International Diplomacy at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya and Israel's former ambassador to the U.N. (Israel Hayom Mar 25)

Iran: Better Now Than Later By Ariel Kabiri

Unlike a pre-emptive strike — an attack on your enemy hours or days before he attacks you, which is a legal and relatively frequent practice between countries — a pre-emptive war means attacking the enemy once conditions for the attacker become optimal. This is both illegal and rare. With that, in certain conditions a pre-emptive war — or in other words, "better now than later" — makes more sense. Do these conditions exist in the current Israeli-Iranian context?

Saddam Hussein irked the United States before he acquired nuclear weapons, earning himself a military invasion and public execution. Libyan President Moammar Gadhafi relinquished his nuclear development program and he, too, is no longer with us. North Korea deceitfully acquired atomic weapons, and it appears its regime now has immunity from external attempts to overthrow it. The lesson for Iran is clear. Indeed, despite the nuclear deal with Western powers, Iran seems to be steaming ahead with its development of ballistic missiles and compatible nuclear warheads, while pursuing its ambitions of forcibly changing the face of the Middle East. Iran's deeds and the lessons it has learned from North Korea's nuclearization have led to a reality where Iran's nuclear power is a question of when, not if. What, then, will such a future look like?

The research literature posits two competing mechanisms that provide glimpses at such a future. The first is "nuclear peace" and the second is "the paradox of stability and instability." If the first mechanism — which seems to have led the U.S. and the former Soviet Union to a stable and long-term peace — is to be implemented in the Middle East, we can expect Iran and Israel to tread cautiously. Under such conditions, the fear of nuclear war is so strong that both sides would take great pains to avoid any show of violence capable of sparking a process of conventional escalation ultimately devolving into a nuclear conflict.

The second mechanism — which apparently led the Soviet Union and China in 1969, and India and Pakistan in 1999 to exchange conventional military blows — presently exists in the Middle East. We can, therefore, expect a surge in conventional clashes between the sides. This paradox stems from the unique efficacy of strategic stability in the nuclear era, where both sides understand their large population centers are perpetually vulnerable and assures that neither side will start a nuclear war. In this case, the path to a limited conventional war is always open.

Applying this logic, Israel will not attack strategic targets in Iran, and Iran will not attack Israel. However, the thousands of missiles Hezbollah can fire at Israel could render Israel's missile defense systems ineffective. Israel, of course, will attack Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria, but the person making the decisions — the one who has to be convinced to accept defeat — will be safe and sound in Tehran.

Can Israeli society, Western in nature — and which some claim is soft and spoiled — withstand a two-to-three-week barrage of conventional missiles on its cities from Syria and Lebanon and a high number of civilian casualties? To be sure, this scenario can repeat itself every few years. Although Israel has fought wars with frequency in the past, the casualties were primarily soldiers, not civilians, and not in these projected numbers.

If everything detailed above sounds reasonable, then the precise conditions for the irregular logic of "better now than later" are present. A statesman such as Henry Kissinger would certainly tie such a move to a grander complementary regional initiative to end the Israeli-Arab conflict, either by manipulating or perhaps even forcing the various players to accept a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

It appears that with U.S. President Donald Trump's new appointments, Mike Pompeo as secretary of state and John Bolton as national security adviser, the conditions have matured, despite all the expected and unexpected costs, to the point where the dangerous but potentially revolutionary logic of "better now than later" can be applied. *The writer is a researcher and lecturer of international relations at Western Galilee College. (Israel Hayom Mar 28)*

The Secret World of the Palestinian Authority By Bassam Tawil

Headed by Mahmoud Abbas, the PA has since received billions of dollars in aid from the US, EU and several other donor countries.

However, the failure of the donors to demand accountability and transparency from the Palestinian Authority has deprived Palestinians of a significant part of the funds. It has also encouraged Palestinian leaders to continue pocketing millions of dollars, enriching their private and hidden bank accounts.

One would have expected the Western donors to have woken up and noticed that Palestinian leaders are misusing the taxpayer money they send. One would have expected the Americans and Europeans to come to Abbas and his cronies, bang on the table, and demand that they start using and investing money for the welfare of their people, and not for their friends and family members.

The report, published by the Coalition For Accountability And Integrity (AMAN), established in 2000 by a number of civil society organizations working in the field of democracy, human rights, and good governance, shows that the Western donors have learned nothing from their past mistakes.

The report also shows that the Palestinian Authority remains the same corrupt body it has been since its inception more than twenty years ago.

Under Yasser Arafat, the PA was plagued with widespread corruption and mismanagement. His successor, Mahmoud Abbas, has followed in this tradition and, despite his repeated promises, the Palestinian Authority remains as corrupt as ever.

Why should Abbas and his associates work to improve the living conditions of their people if those who are pouring billions of dollars on them continue to turn a blind eye to financial and administrative corruption in the PA they are funding?

Entitled "Integrity and Combating Corruption: Palestine 2017," the AMAN report reviews the status of corruption and lack of transparency and accountability in the Palestinian Authority during 2017.

It is one of the most comprehensive reports looking into the widespread corruption and squandering of public funds by the Palestinian Authority leadership.

The report found, for example, that the Palestinian Authority had invested \$17.5 million in building a "presidential palace" for Abbas. The palace is built on an area of 4,700 square meters.

After facing criticism over the project, Abbas decided to convert the palace into a huge national library.

Here is what the report had to say about the grandiose project: "Honorable as it may sound to convert the presidential palace into a public library, it remains to be the epitome of misuse of public funds as well as a bad example of lack of prioritization. And although the idea of building a hospitality palace for official foreign delegations is not evil in itself, it is not and never was a priority for Palestinians, given the urgent need to finance vital services such as health and education. This is apart from the chronic financial crisis plaguing the Palestinian Authority. And while recognizing the importance of a national library, the idea of converting the palace to one is detrimental, since it would cost more than building a new library from the start due to the construction and re-construction details it involves."

The 83-year-old Abbas could have invested the \$17.5 million in building a new hospital or creating new jobs for his people, but he chose to build a palace for his cohorts and himself on a hilltop on the outskirts of Ramallah.

Was the palace part of Abbas's plan for a quiet, comfortable and luxurious retirement? The idea of converting the palace into a national library is equally ridiculous. For the Palestinians, a new school or hospital is more urgently needed than a library. Besides, at this point, the Palestinians hardly need a library that looks like a royal palace.

Here is another example provided by the report concerning the Palestinian Authority's practice of squandering public money: paying the salaries and expenses of a non-existent airline called "Palestine Airlines." It said that "hundreds of employees of this company continue to receive salaries and allowances from the Palestinian Authority, although the company is not registered as a company in accordance with Palestinian law."

The budget for this company, the report found, is included in the budget of the Palestinian Ministry of Transportation, but with no specific details of how the money is spent.

The "Palestine Airlines" employees are not the only civil servants who

are paid despite not working and their being employed by a company that does not really exist. According to the report, members of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), the Palestinians' parliament, have also been benefiting from monthly salaries, despite the parliament having been paralyzed for more than a decade as a result of the dispute between Abbas's ruling Fatah faction and Hamas.

"The continuation of the dysfunction of the PLC, in 2107, posed the biggest challenge to formal accountability and oversight of the government's performance in terms of management of public funds and public affairs in general," the report stated. In 2017, the report revealed, the Palestinian Authority spent more than 39 million shekels (about \$11 million) on the PLC. Half of the money went to salaries for the Palestinian lawmakers even though they have not been working for more than a decade. The report continued:

"It is the right of citizens to inquire about the feasibility of these expenses without tangible results of the role of the PLC, and its failure to hold sessions that include members of Parliament in the West Bank and Gaza, in accordance with the law... Results of the government's plans did not show restraint in the continuing financial crisis of the PA, nor rationalization of public expenditures, or control over procurement and administrative and operational expenditures. In addition, talk of austerity continued without carrying out any serious implementation steps."

The report also found continued flaws in the structure of the Palestinian Authority security apparatus. The increase in the number of high-ranking officers had a negative impact on the performance of the security forces. In addition, this increase in the numbers placed an added burden on the public budget. The percentage of officers in three security apparatuses accounted for 50% of all officers in the Palestinian Authority's eight security forces.

The report found that corruption has also extended to the purchase of vehicles for Palestinian officials and their family members and friends. "Influential persons in senior positions were granted tax exemptions with legal basis for approval," the report found. "The amount of wasted funds is enormous." Here, it is worth noting that the Palestinian Authority law allows Palestinian terrorists who spent more than 20 years in Israeli prison to receive, one time only, a free car. This, of course, is in addition to the Palestinian Authority's policy of paying salaries to families of Palestinian prisoners and "martyrs."

According to the report, "political corruption has deepened in the Palestinian case due to the presence of two authorities, one in the West Bank and the other in the Gaza Strip." This division, which is the result of the Hamas-Fatah power struggle, has harmed Palestinian lives on many levels and negatively affected public funds, human rights and freedoms, and development as the two governments took decisions and measures to weaken each other.

In 2017, the Palestinian Authority's Anti-Corruption Commission received 430 complaints, but only 21 were referred to the prosecution's office, the report noted. "This indicates that the commission, its staff and follow-up mechanisms are slow," it added. "As for the nature of the cases, they ranged from embezzlement to abuse of power to fraud to breach of trust and bribery." The largest proportion of those accused of corruption crimes were employees in the governmental public sector.

The report also took to task the Palestinian Authority for the way it approved its 2017 budget. The full version of the budget was not made public; only revenues and expenditures were presented with no details as to allocations for each ministry. Nor did the budget law include a table illustrating the Palestinian Authority's debts and loans or propose a plan for the collection of payments of these debts and loans. In addition, contributions and investments of the Palestinian Authority in local and non-local companies were also not clarified.

The Western media completely ignores such reports. By doing so, Western journalists are betraying their own people by failing to inform them how their foreign-aid money is being embezzled and squandered by corrupt Palestinian leaders. The Palestinians, of course, are the primary victims in this story. They live in poverty as their leaders scabble to misappropriate public funds. The lives of the Palestinians could have been much better had their leaders been held accountable for their actions.

For Palestinians, to confront the dictators in Ramallah and the Gaza Strip means nothing short of putting one's life on the line. Yet the same is not true for the international community, including Western mainstream media.

Why, then, do they continue to look the other way as Abbas constructs gilded mansions for himself and his buddies? Perhaps because they are too busy digging up dirt about Israel. But when journalists close their eyes and ears, enabling the theft of American and European taxpayer money by despotic Palestinian leaders who continue to injure their own people, the tinsel begins to tarnish on the golden world of the Palestinian Authority. *The writer is a Muslim based in the Middle East. (Gatestone Mar 29)*