Arab leaders endorse plan to rebuild Gaza under Palestinian Authority

AFP- Arab leaders endorsed on Tuesday a plan to rebuild the Gaza Strip under the future administration of the Palestinian Authority, presenting an alternative to US President Donald Trump’s widely condemned proposal to take over the territory and displace its people.

The prospect of the Palestinian Authority (PA) governing Gaza remains far from certain, however, with Israel having ruled out any future role for the body, and Trump having closed the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) liaison office in Washington during his first term while stepping up support for Israel.

Trump triggered global outrage by suggesting the United States “take over” the Gaza Strip and turn it into the “Riviera of the Middle East”, while forcing its Palestinian inhabitants to relocate to Egypt or Jordan.

Tuesday’s Arab League summit in Cairo – a day after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reiterated his support for Trump’s proposal – offered an alternative with the adoption of a “comprehensive Arab plan”.

It announced the establishment of a trust fund to pay for the territory’s reconstruction, and urged the international community to back it.

“All these efforts are proceeding in parallel with the launch of a political track” towards Palestinian statehood, it added, an ambition that Israeli leaders have opposed.

The statement welcomed “the Palestinian decision to form a Gaza administration committee under the umbrella of the Palestinian government”.

– ‘Remain on their land’ –

The summit also called on Palestinian representation to be unified under the PLO, an umbrella group that is the dominant political force within the Palestinian Authority – and which excludes Hamas.

The PA had previously governed Gaza before losing power there in 2007 to Islamist Hamas.

Hamas, which sparked the war in Gaza with its October 7, 2023 attack on Israel, said it welcomed the summit’s plan and the proposed formation of a temporary committee “to oversee relief efforts, reconstruction and governance”.

But it was unclear how willing Hamas would be to relinquish control of Gaza.

Israel meanwhile said the Arab leaders’ proposal failed “to address the realities” and criticised its reliance on both the PA and the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA.

“Both have repeatedly demonstrated corruption, support for terrorism, and failure in resolving the issue”, the Israeli foreign ministry said in a statement.

Palestinians, Arab states and many European governments have rejected Trump’s proposal for US control of Gaza, opposing any efforts to expel its people.

Trump has recently appeared to soften his stance, saying he was “not forcing” the plan, which experts have said could violate international law.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi said the plan would ensure Palestinians “remain on their land”, but was careful

not to criticise Trump.

The summit's final communique warned against "sinful attempts to displace the Palestinian people", saying they would "usher the region into a new phase of conflicts".

For Palestinians, any forced displacement evokes memories of the "Nakba", or catastrophe – the mass displacement in the war that led to Israel's creation in 1948.

Sisi said Tuesday that the new management committee, composed of Palestinian technocrats, was aimed at "paving the way for the return of the Palestinian Authority to the Strip".

Veteran Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas, also addressing the summit, said a working committee had been formed to prepare for the PA resuming its role in Gaza.

UN chief Antonio Guterres endorsed the initiative in Cairo to rebuild Gaza, adding the world body was prepared to "fully cooperate".

– Ceasefire impasse –

Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel resulted in the deaths of 1,218 people, most of them civilians, while Israel's military retaliation in Gaza has killed at least 48,405 people, also mostly civilians, data from both sides show.

The war has devastated Gaza and created a dire humanitarian crisis.

A fragile ceasefire since January saw an influx of humanitarian aid into Gaza, before Israel on Sunday announced it was blocking deliveries until Hamas accepted its terms for an extension of the truce.

The deal's first phase ended at the weekend, after six weeks of relative calm that included exchanges of Israeli hostages for Palestinian prisoners.

While Israel has said it wants to extend the first phase until mid-April, Hamas has insisted on a transition to the deal’s second phase, which should lead to a permanent end to the war.

Hours before the summit opened Tuesday, Israel’s top diplomat Gideon Saar said it demanded the “total demilitarisation of Gaza” and the removal of Hamas to proceed to the second phase of the ceasefire deal.

Hamas leader Sami Abu Zuhri rejected the demand.

AFP