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NEW PLANS ON THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN FRONT

By Robert Malley*

U.S. and Israeli policymakers, with the backing of some Europeans and Arabs, have been considering plans to revive the peace process in an effort to discredit, marginalize and ultimately oust Hamas. The overall objective is to provide moderate Palestinian forces with the political and military ability to confront Hamas and, over the next two years (by the end of the Bush administration) ensure that Fatah once again is in charge and the peace process well advanced. Although it still is only at a preparatory stage, four broad components are in play:

A. Security

The goal is to strengthen security forces close to Fatah and to President Abbas through both overt and covert means, using both Western and Arab sources. There is widespread agreement that, at this phase, Fatah forces lack the discipline, organization or means to confront Hamas, especially in Gaza. Their forces are divided, ill-equipped and corrupt. They typically act more like personal militias than as an embryonic army. General Dayton has been tasked with reorganizing, training and streamlining them, while pro-Western Arab countries have pledged support in terms of military hardware and money.

B. Immediate Political Basket

The USG has been pressing Prime Minister Olmert to provide President Abbas (as opposed to the Hamas-led government) with immediate political dividends, including particularly on access and movement (the lifting of checkpoints and facilitation of trade into and out of Gaza), removal of settlement outposts, prisoner release and the transfer of some of the withheld tax revenues. The point is to demonstrate to the Palestinian public that Abbas and Fatah can achieve what Hamas cannot.

C. Longer Term Political Basket

The USG along with several Israeli political leaders (the prime minister and foreign minister in particular) are exploring ways to create a more meaningful political horizon for the Palestinians. This would take the shape of an Olmert/Abbas agreement whose implementation would depend on the Palestinian government fulfilling the Quartet conditions – recognition of Israel, acceptance of past agreements, and renunciation of violence – so as to show the Palestinian people what they could achieve if the Islamists were ousted. The character of the agreement has yet to be agreed upon. Among the ideas being considered is the establishment of a Palestinian state with provisional borders in Gaza and parts of the West Bank. Some are advocating going further and seeking a final status agreement or, alternatively, an interim agreement accompanied by the issuance of “Bush parameters” outlining U.S. views on a permanent deal.

D. Regional and International Basket

European and Arab countries are to be mobilized to support these various tracks, and in particular to offer full diplomatic, political and economic backing to any Israeli-Palestinian agreement. The objective is to further underscore Hamas's isolation while boosting Israel's confidence by increasing regional acceptance. The broader strategic goal appears to be to roll back Iranian influence in the region by constituting a U.S./EU/moderate Arab front.

Opportunities and Risks

The plan relies on an implicit convergence of interests between the U.S., Israel, moderate Arab countries and at least an important constituency within Fatah. In principle, were it to succeed, Hamas will be significantly weakened, the peace process will be advanced and the U.S. will have restored some of its credibility while constituting a more solid alliance against Iran and its regional allies. If Fatah were to enjoy the combined military, financial and political backing of the US, some EU countries, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, it could vastly improve its chances against an isolated Hamas.

However, there are serious questions about whether it can be implemented and, if so, at what cost.

- Fatah may not benefit politically given its current state of division and disarray. Some members have publicly denounced Abbas's call for new elections and infighting that cost Fatah the last parliamentary elections has yet to end. The perception that the U.S. and Israel are helping Fatah in order to weaken Hamas is not going down well with some Fatah members, particularly if prospects of a civil war were to increase.
- Hamas leaders have told us in no uncertain terms that they will not sit idly by if Abbas were to prematurely and unconstitutionally call for elections. Organizing such elections without Hamas approval will prove extremely difficult given Hamas's control of government institutions; even if they are held, Hamas is unlikely to participate, reducing if not nullifying their legitimacy; even if a new government is formed in their wake, it will lack the legitimacy required to deal meaningfully with Israel. As a senior Hamas leader told us, they will counter any such move by organizing elections for a reformed or even new PLO (elections that are overdue by over a decade), thereby challenging Abbas's authority to negotiate with Israel.
- Fatah-affiliated security forces may acquire better and more numerous military arsenal, but Hamas fighters are said to be far more motivated and disciplined in the Gaza strip. The proliferation and chaos among Fatah forces is such that significant assistance is required simply in order to maintain their current strength and prevent the defecting of various militias. In contrast, Hamas succeeded in creating a sophisticated, disciplined, 8,000-person Executive Force in Gaza in a relatively short period of time, reportedly with Iranian backing. Given more time, Abbas's force may become more formidable, but in Gaza it is hard to see it overtaking Hamas in the foreseeable future.
- The current cease-fire, limited to Gaza, is fragile and has tended to reflect at least in part the state of Hamas/Fatah relations. (Following Abbas's call for elections, Hamas/Fatah violence, but also Palestinian rocket firing against Israel increased). If the plan as described above were to unfold, Hamas is likely to end whatever cease-fire currently exists, reverting to large-scale attacks against Israel directly or through other militant groups. Israel will be in no position to take meaningful steps toward the Palestinians (lifting of roadblocks, increased access and movement, let alone territorial withdrawals) in a context of increased violence. The first major terrorist attack probably will lead Israel to reverse whatever steps it had taken.

Is There An Alternative?

Hamas has made clear its priority, for now, is to be able to govern and prove it can deliver on its electoral promises – things it has been prevented from doing since the elections. At the same time, its leaders are adamant they will not budge on their position regarding the Quartet conditions, notably in terms of recognizing Israel. Instead, they are prepared to deal with Israel on day to day matters, allow Abbas to negotiate with Olmert and acquiesce in any deal that is endorsed in a Palestinian referendum.

This suggests an alternative course of action that allows the U.S. to make a genuine push on the peace process if it truly wants to without risking a Palestinian civil war or intensified Israeli-Palestinian confrontation.

- Formation of a Palestinian national unity government that does not precisely meet the Quartet conditions but is committed to a cease-fire and to negotiations between the PLO (headed by Abbas) and Israel;
- Reciprocal and comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian cease fire, along with a prisoner exchange;
- Lifting of the international siege against the PA and payment of withheld tax revenues by Israel;
- Resumption of Israeli-PLO negotiations, with the understanding that any agreement (whether on a state with provisional borders or a final status accord) will be submitted to the Palestinian people in a referendum.

As of now, the U.S. is resisting this approach, determined not to dilute the Quartet conditions and convinced that defeating Hamas is imperative for Israeli-Palestinian but also broader regional equities.

What is needed now is a stronger European and/or Arab stance to help unlock the situation while simultaneously avoiding worse case scenarios. To achieve that goal, key countries would have to convey to Abbas their decision to lift the sanctions in the event a national unity government committed to a mutual cease fire and to PLO-Israeli negotiations were formed – even if it did not precisely live up to the Quartet conditions. The U.S. probably would maintain its position for political and legal reasons, but could play a role in promoting negotiations between Abbas and Olmert in this context.

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