

Palestinians Trapped at Crossroads

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Firing home-made primitive rockets at Israeli targets from the Gaza Strip, the mass sweeping through the Palestinian – Egyptian border crossing of Rafah in January and the series of ongoing peaceful demonstrations at Gaza’s crossing points with Israel are not an aggressive demonstration of self-confidence, but more a show of defensive despair and weakness against the tight Israeli military siege, as much as Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas’ threats to resign are passive defensive reaction to the political siege imposed on him by the United States and Israel, who so far fail to deliver on their promises to bring about an agreement to create a Palestinian state by the end of 2008.

Given the corruption investigations, which have already heralded either a premiership change or early elections that would lead to a government change in Israel , Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is likely nearing the end of his term to join Abbas and US President George W. Bush, whose terms will come to their end next January, as outgoing leaders whom all their protagonists are counting down time until their departure, before they could deliver on their promised vision of a two-state solution for the Palestinian – Israeli conflict.

Their failure is trapping the Palestinian national movement at a historical crossroads by a peace option that could not deliver, with no other alternatives, and a peace process that is meant for itself as a crisis management tactic, while a multi-layer internal division is paralyzing its central decision-making to render it incapable of being up to the challenge of breaking through the impasse.

The Palestinian national movement finds itself in a deteriorating state of paralysis. “There’s almost no Palestinian leadership,” Kadoura Fares, a former Palestinian Cabinet minister and a leading member of President Abbas’ Fatah party, told the Washington Times on May 15.

This state of affairs is old enough. On May 31 2007, former Palestinian negotiator and senior associate member of St. Antony’s College, Oxford , Ahmad Samih Khalidi, wrote in The Guardian: “What was once a dedicated and vibrant Palestinian national movement is today almost bereft of effective leadership.”

The emergence of Fatah al-Islam in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, “the infestation of al-Qaida-type salafism,” which has already reached Gaza Strip, according to Khalidi, and the wide-spreading attraction of the one-state or bi-national state option among the Palestinians, as an alternative for the two-state solution for the Palestinian Israeli conflict, are manifestations of the deteriorating influence of the national movement led by both the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and “Hammas.”

Several interrelated and interdependent factors are sustaining the status quo:

First, the US-sponsored political process launched with much fanfare in Annapolis , Maryland on November 17 last year has almost lost steam, leaving the two-state solution doomed and the PLO disillusioned, but in a loss of what the next step should be.

The PLO is now aware that they were used by the US-Israeli allies to appease the Arab “moderates” into being tricked in their turn into closing their eyes to the US free hand in Iraq and vis-à-vis Iran and Syria . The Quartet of the Middle East peace mediators, comprising the US , UN, EU and Russia , subscribes to the same policy.

Second, Peace alternatives, like the one-state solution, have slim chances to find Israeli subscribers and are already ruled out by the US-Israeli determination to impose the recognition of Israel as a “Jewish state” on Palestinians as a precondition for making peace.

Third, Both Amman and Cairo as well as a Palestinian semi-consensus decisively rule out an old Israeli alternative to annex the West Bank to Jordan (the so-called Jordanian option) and Gaza Strip to Egypt . “Jordanians consider the mere talk on this ... a conspiracy against them,” former minister of information and member of the upper house of parliament, Saleh Qallab, wrote in Asharq al-Awsat on January 31, adding that Egypt “knows” that restoring Gaza to its pre-1967 status would be an Egyptian “time bomb.”

Forth, the peace “contacts” via Turkey between Syria and Israel is further proof of the impasse on the Palestinian – Israeli track. Marc Perelman, in The Jewish Daily Forward on May 22, quoted Aaron David Miller, who was part of American peace negotiation teams in the region for three decades, as saying: “Leaving one track and going for the other is a way for Israel to get some leverage on the Palestinian track that seems stuck.”

Fifth, the multi-layer internal division (between Hamas and Fatah, within Fatah itself, the presidency and Hamas, which dominates the Palestinian legislative Council (PLC), the governments of Ramallah and Gaza) is paralyzing Palestinian central decision-making. “Neither the peace process, nor the (upcoming) sixth Fatah conference can succeed without national reconciliation,” senior Fatah leader and former national security adviser, Jibril al-Rjoub, told Al-Arabiyya satellite television on February 17. However, national reconciliation remains hostage to US-Israeli veto and anti-Hamas preconditions.

Sixth, the crossroads is not only visible because the US sponsor of the peace process is already preoccupied with the electoral campaign that will bring about a new administration next January, but it is more visible by the internal Palestinian division.

National institutional terms of reference have almost been obsolete for years now. The last Fatah conference was held in 1989. The PLO has been practically overtaken and marginalized by the Palestinian Authority (PA) and its marginalization doomed its leading role among the Palestinian Diaspora and refugees in exile, leaving a vacuum that was filled by Hamas and the Islamic Jihad.

Moreover the PA institutional references are either in no better legitimacy or their legitimacy will expire by the end of the 2008. President Abbas’ term expires next January; the PLC, whose term will expire in January 2009, is paralyzed by Israeli detention of more than fifty of its lawmakers. Palestinian Central Election Commission is already bracing for local elections be the year end.

Convening the Fatah sixth conference, reviving the PLO back to its leading role, inclusion by the PLO of Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other emerging non-PLO political parties, are overdue prerequisites for a “legitimate” national unity, while renewal of the PA institutional references is already on the agenda.

If the national institutional references are not revived for whatever reason, be it the US-Israeli veto or other, and the renewal of the PA institutions is adversely affected by the national division and not properly done according to the Basic Law, the ensuing inaction would not only exacerbate the divide but it would render the Palestinian people leaderless, deprive Israel of a credible Palestinian peace partner and rule out peace and any credible peace process for a long time to come; in the end this could be the real undeclared US-Israeli strategy!

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