

UN Sponsored Middle East Quartet Corners PLO, Hamas into Critical Options

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In Washington on February 2, the Middle East Quartet of peace mediators promised the Palestinian people more of the same devastating status quo, perpetuating their 40-year old Israeli occupation, prolonging the international siege imposed on them, exacerbating their internal divide, and thus cornering them into a situation that they can only shake off either through civil war or unconditional surrender to the U.S.-backed Israeli-dictated fait accompli, unless their national sense of accountability could prevail to make mutual compromises into national consensus.

The Quartet statement read to reporters by the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon boils down to promising them only more of what the U.S. former president Jimmy Carter recently summed up: "In the last six years there has not been one day of good faith, substantive negotiation between Israel and the Palestinians, not one day."

"Recognizing the critical need to end the Palestinian/Israeli conflict," the Quartet pledged to support efforts to put in place a process with the goal of ending the occupation that began in 1967 and creating an independent, democratic and viable Palestinian state, living side by side in peace and security with Israel, and reaffirmed its commitment to a just, lasting, and comprehensive peace based on UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338," the statement said.

It was a positive introductory comprehension of the end goal, which Ki-moon and his co-mediators – the High Representative for European Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana, European Commissioner for External Relations Benita Ferrero-Waldner, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and her Russian and German counterparts, Sergei Lavrov and Frank-Walter Steinmeier — immediately shot in the feet by the "road map" they adopted to reach that goal.

They failed to incorporate any reference in their statement to the UN Security Council resolution 1515, which commits them and the international community to the so-called two-state solution, although it was a non-binding resolution because it wasn't adopted according to Chapter VII of the UN Charter.

Then they evaded any time-tabled commitment to reviving the peace process. True they "welcomed" the 23 December summit of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli premier Ehud Olmert and their trilateral meeting with Rice, scheduled for February 21, but the upcoming meeting according to the Quartet will be only a "dialogue" and to Rice's on record statements will be "informal." The Quartet's pledge "to give active follow-up to these meetings and to remain closely engaged" sounded hollow and meaningless.

The Quartet also “noted the continuing importance of the Arab Peace Initiative,” which envisions an all-comprising and comprehensive solution for the conflict with Israel, but failed to suggest an international peace conferences, some dubs as Madrid II — a key demand by the Arab League, the PLO and Palestinian Authority (PA). Israel has rejected both the Arab Initiative and the conference idea.

The international mediators “called for continued international assistance to the Palestinian people,” and “encouraged ... the development of the Palestinian economy,” but, in obvious self-contradiction, did not lift the Israeli and U.S.-led siege imposed as a collective punishment on the PA and people.

Hypocritically, “the Quartet called for Palestinian unity,” but fomented the Palestinian divide by urging donors to selectively “focus on preserving and building the capacity of institutions of Palestinian governance,” while at the same time maintaining the diplomatic, economic and political isolation of the democratically elected Palestinian government and ignoring Russian, Qatari and British parliamentary demands to engage the PA government shortly ahead of their meeting.

Similarly, “the Quartet expressed its deep concern at the violence among Palestinians,” but failed to commit its U.S. member to refrain from fueling the violence with money, training and weapons to one side of the infighting in a declared pledge to oust an elected government or coerce it into accepting the Israeli preconditions to lift the siege.

Then the Quartet concluded with reiterating “its call for the Palestinian Authority Government to commit ... to non-violence, recognition of Israel, and acceptance of previous agreements and obligations,” ignoring the fact that the PA government, regardless of whether led by Fatah or Hamas, is an institution mandated according to Oslo accords to manage the Palestinian apolitical autonomy and is only an administrative tool of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the political authority who sets the PA’s terms of reference and still committed to the aforesaid “principles,” a strict commitment pressuring it into the brink of civil war.

Palestinian Options

The disappointing outcome of the Quartet meeting rules out any early resumption of “formal” peace talks, leaves the Palestinian people and leadership divided on the verge of civil war under the pressures of both the occupation and siege, thus leaving the divide with only one option: Individual and collective dialogue to review the deadlocked and futile peace process as well as the yet un-delivering violent and non-violent resistance, which both have almost reached a standstill.

Palestinian pollster Khalil al-Shikaki in a surveyed analysis dated February 1 (www.pcpsr.org) concluded that President Abbas has four options to break through the Palestinian impasse: 1) to form a national unity government, 2) to organize early presidential and legislative election, 3) to fire the Hamas-led Palestinian government and form an emergency one, and 4) to resign. Al-Shikaki ruled out the last three options as counterproductive to the “Palestinian vital interests” and could lead to more infighting. However his preferable first option could not “completely end the siege and boycott in a short period.”

The only breakthrough left is mutual compromises. According to al-Shikaki, Hamas’

flexibility in dealing “positively” with the Quartet’s three conditions to “respect” the signed accords, recognize Israel as a “fait accompli” and agree to an open-ended truce makes the first option “viable.” The Fatah-led PLO has yet to reciprocate by giving priority to national consensus more than to the Israeli-drafted and Quartet-adopted three conditions. Palestinian national unity will lead in the end to break through the siege.

All sides of the Palestinian divide, the Israeli Occupying Power and the world community should adapt to the fact that the 40-year old monopoly of Palestinian decision-making by Fatah came to an end on January 25, 2006, when Hamas broke into the role of a principal decision-maker by a landslide electoral victory that empowered it with dominant executive and legislative powers, and sooner or later the Islamic Resistance Movement will gain a parallel dominance in the PLO, a democratically-clinched right that Hamas in its defense has tactically contributed to the ensuing bloody power struggle.

However 12 months on, the unity government has failed the national bilateral and multilateral dialogue as well as Islamic and Arab mediation efforts, including Qatari, Egyptian, Jordanian, Syrian and Islamic mediators; several ceasefire agreements have so far collapsed on the security approach. The latest Saudi Arabian good offices are also expected to stumble on the same approach, which foiled previous similar efforts.

Fatah’s Revolutionary Council, chaired by Abbas in the West Bank town of Ramallah on Sunday, suspended a three-day session in waiting for the outcome of the Mecca-hosted talks between Abbas and Hamas’ leader Khalid Misha’al on Feb. 5, but warned the PLO will go for the Hamas-rejected presidential and legislative election in June if the two leaders failed to agree on a unity government based on the Quartet’s three conditions, which practically will sooner or later doom the outcome, because Hamas views its subscription to the Quartet’s agenda as a carte blanche for the Quartet, Israel and the PLO to resume their 15-year old counterproductive and futile so-called “peace process.”

The PLO and Fatah leadership insists on Hamas accommodating the Quartet conditions as a Palestinian obligation to lift the siege, which Hamas says was only tightened after its electoral victory and was in place before that as a mechanism to pressure the PLO into accepting the comatose former Israeli premier Ariel Sharon-initiated long-term interim arrangement of a transitional Palestinian state on 42 percent of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Both Hamas and the PLO have recently unequivocally rejected this Israeli unilateral plan. The Quartet’s silence or vague stance on the arrangement and their promised “informal” revival of high-level Israeli – Palestinian “dialogue” should provide enough common ground for a PLO-Hamas consensus.

The deadlocked peace process, the paralysis of the PLO and PA institutions, the inability of the Palestinian presidency and government alike to rule the autonomous 42 percent of the Israeli-reoccupied West Bank or the militarily-besieged Gaza Strip, the zero sum situation where the Palestinians have neither an “armed struggle” nor popular non-violent resistance save for seasonal symbolic expressions and where the erosion of public trust in both leading movements, according to latest Palestinian public surveys, threatens to render the Palestinians leaderless, all have locked the Palestinian national liberation movement in its current impasse.

The ensuing divide has led to bloody street battles that embroiled both the Fatah and Hamas security executive forces in a militia-style power struggle in mutual self-destruction, taking down with them what government institutions the PA has built since 1993, including

public services infrastructure like power stations, universities and police and intelligence stations, especially in Gaza Strip – as this mission was left for the Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) in the West Bank – amid mounting and widening popular outrage, security chaos exacerbated by the crushing economic siege, popular loss of hope deepened by the Quartet's latest unpromising meeting, helplessness of Arab and Islamic brothers who are too preoccupied to rush for rescue with the several battle fronts opened by turn once by the U.S. and then by Israel.

All these and other factors are creating the ideal environment to look for survival in a new anti-occupation uprising that might sweep away also the autonomy and both protagonists who are wasting their energies in a struggle over who manages the Palestinian prison, according to the Palestinian-Arab Israeli MP, Azmi Bishara, in a recent article.

However, joining of the Oslo political institutions by Hamas, accompanied by the two-year old strict commitment to a unilateral truce, was an indirect declaration of a change in course and tactics that confused the movement's declared strategy among supporters because of the contradiction between rejecting the Oslo status quo and being incorporated into its institutions, let alone being embroiled in bloody power struggle over who leads them.

Similarly, the dead end the negotiations with Israel has reached, the meager results the negotiations have produced, the insistence of the PLO on holding the Palestinian self-determination hostage to the whims of the Israeli-U.S. good faith and its determination to commit Hamas to the same futile course – which deprived the PLO even of the limited autonomy it was offered on an interim basis until July 1997, provided a “legitimate” PLO cover to slicing Jerusalem off the occupied territories and isolating it as inaccessible for Palestinians, and doubled the colonial Jewish settlers to more than 450.000 since 1967 – have eroded the PLO's credibility.

Salam Fayyad, the former PA Finance Minister and a founder of the new Third Way political party alongside Hanan Ashrawi who are both incumbent MPs, described the current status quo to the Seventh Annual Herzliya Conference in Tel Aviv on Jan. 24: “The nature of relations today between Israelis and Palestinians has reached levels of micromanagement, where Israel is involved in the minute details of the lives of Palestinians. It is important to remember that the entirety of the West Bank and Gaza Strip is ruled by military orders – not by politics, logic, or reason – but by military orders with (Israel 's) “security” dictating the rules of the game.” To hell of course with Palestinian security!

Both sides have all the compelling reasons to backtrack and bend on individual as well as collective reviews of the status quo.

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