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**SCOTT ATRAN, ROBERT AXELROD
AND RICHARD DAVIS**

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BLOGGERS I

Give Palestine's Unity Government a Chance (2 comments)

03.07.2007

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Damascus, Ramallah, and Jerusalem, March 4, 2007

Whatever the final makeup of the unity government now being formed between Palestinian president Abbas's Fateh and rival Hamas, it is certain to fall short of demands by the United States that it renounce violence, recognize Israel and accept past peace agreements. Although the U.S. and Israel threaten to undermine the unity government through isolation and sanctions, Abbas insists that this power-sharing arrangement is the best chance to end the political and economic crisis resulting from the international embargo of the current Hamas-led government, and to move towards peace with Israel.

There are two ways to handle the short-term future. One way is to give Abbas some time to reconcile Palestinian factions into engaging Israel and to use his mandate to pursue the peace process. The risk of this option is that it may strengthen those who will never accept Israel. Another way is to undermine the unity government, with the risks of widening support for Palestinian radicals, increasing Iranian influence, and destabilizing the region through the unpredictable consequences of civil strife. On balance, the better option is to give the unity government a chance.

In this time of great uncertainty in the Middle East, we went to the area as part of a scientific study on the values underpinning political conflict. Our questions evoked deep and informative reflections from a variety of senior Israeli and Palestinian leaders on the prospects of a Palestinian unity government. Upon considering these reflections, we conclude that temporarily supporting the unity government carries less risk than undermining it.

Most Israeli leaders we talked to agree that Abbas is sincere in wanting to steer the unity government and all Palestinian factions to recognize Israel. Based on discussion with Hamas leaders, Khalil Shikaki, director of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR) in Ramallah, believes that Hamas will allow Abbas to negotiate a peace deal with Israel, and if a deal with Israel is accepted by a majority of Palestinians in a referendum then Hamas will acquiesce.

"The unity government will recognize Israel and address the issue of violence," Abbas's security adviser Nasr Yusef told us in Ramallah, "but we need time to continue to help Hamas moderate."

Ami Ayalon, former head of Shin Beit, Israel's counter-terrorism and internal security agency, notes that some Hamas leaders have shown willingness to moderate, though not enough to allay Israelis' fear that in the end Hamas wants to kill them. "The weak point in Hamas," he informed us, "is that its power comes from Palestinian society and the street. Palestinian society is very pragmatic and most people support a peace settlement with Israel." In fact, PSR polls indicate that 63 percent of Palestinians would recognize Israel as a Jewish state, and more than 70 percent support some kind of two-state solution. Ayalon reasons that if Abbas can deliver palpable dividends to the Palestinian people through the unity government, including economic improvement and reduced fear of violence, "then Hamas must follow or whither."

Israeli opposition leader and former prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu disagrees. At a meeting in the Knesset in Jerusalem he told us that Hamas is unlikely to ever moderate because it is part of a militant Islam - whose most threatening strain at the moment stems from Iran - which cannot tolerate Israel because it represents the West. "Iran is the strategic backbone of Hamas," says Netanyahu, so without Iran "Hamas would go down the tubes very quickly." Nasr Yusef agrees that Iran is an important part of the equation, because it provides the outside money that empowers Hamas's militant camp and the militia it controls. "But," he says, "if money and security come through the unity government, rather than Iran, then the moderates have a chance." Either way, Iranian influence in Palestine diminishes.

What evidence is there that Hamas might moderate its position?

After intense debate among senior Hamas leaders at a meeting in Damascus, the deputy chairman of Hamas's politburo, Musa Abu Marzook, made the following statement:

"We cannot renounce violence because we cannot renounce resistance to our homeland. Let Israel withdraw from our homeland to the 1967 borders. And let there be a Palestinian state, because there already is an Israeli state. Then there will be no resistance, no violence. In the meantime, we are looking for a relationship with Israel, a truce, a ceasefire, a mutual cessation of hostilities, a hudna, an armistice."

Ahmed Yusef, political adviser to Palestinian prime minister Ismail Haniya, told us on the telephone from Gaza, "We endorse Abu Marzook's statement."

But in a less conciliatory tone on the same day in Moscow, Hamas politburo chairman Khaled Meshaal stated that only when Israel ends its occupation will "the Palestinian people make its position clear." In addition, Marzook revealed that Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad met with him to get Hamas's acceptance of prior agreements. "But we refused." Marzook stipulated that Hamas "respects but does not accept" all previous Arab league initiatives, and Hamas chooses which provisions to accept, including from the 1967 "three no's" Khartoum resolution (no peace, no negotiations, no recognition of Israel) as well from the 2002 Saudi initiative which calls for peace and mutual recognition. According to Marzook this studied ambiguity "gives room to Israel, America and Abu Mazin [Abbas] to work. The more Abu Mazin gets for the Palestinian people the closer we get to Abu Mazin."

Others see this ambiguity as pure deception. Some therefore say that Hamas must be destroyed and the best way to destroy Hamas is to use the embargo to further cripple the already bankrupt economy, thereby alienating the Palestinian people, a majority of whom now fall below the poverty level. But there is scant evidence this strategy will work. In fact, the present crisis has not appreciably decreased base support for Hamas (38% - 36%), nor has the street moved towards Fateh whose support since December 2005 is unchanged (41%). Only independent voters, who went overwhelmingly for Hamas to give it a narrow victory in the January 2006 legislative elections (44% vs. Fateh's 41%), have shifted support from Hamas to the "wait and see" category of uncommitted voters. Moreover, according to Khalil Shikaki, polling data over the last decade indicates that when conditions worsen, Palestinian

support tends towards Hamas.

Many observers in the region agree that King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia brokered the Mecca accords to prevent escalating civil conflict in Gaza and the West Bank from potentially destabilizing the entire region. But others believe that should the unity government collapse and Palestinian factions go to war, Fateh would decisively defeat Hamas if given sufficient arms. Wars, however, do not always go according to plan. Regardless of the result, Ephraim Halevy former head of Israel's intelligence agency, Mossad, does not foresee a happy outcome: "Civil war is not good for Israel. Fateh may win in the end, Hamas may win, or they may destroy each other. In any case, we could have 3-4 million more Palestinians on our hands to take care of."

A responsibility of any government is to stop violence in its own territory and prevent the collapse of the social and economic institutions needed for civil order. Realizing that Palestinian society was on the brink, Fateh and Hamas have come to the table to try to form such a government. They have already agreed that president Abbas may negotiate with Israel on behalf of the unity government. But without adequate funding this government cannot fulfill its responsibilities, nor can it rein in factions and militia that now depend on outside money from those who oppose peace with Israel.

We believe the international community has the responsibility to allow, at least temporarily, the unity government access to funds that will give it a chance to show the world it can function. And the unity government must convince the international community, including the United States and Israel, that it is more than just a vehicle for Palestinian reconciliation and the preservation of Fateh or Hamas. It must show that it can be a means to achieve a comprehensive peace through diplomacy. To this end, the unity government should negotiate an immediate prisoner exchange and a mutual cessation with Israel of all hostilities, and should rapidly move to implement all prior international agreements according to diplomatic standards.

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A good first step might be restoring the billion dollars, of their money, that we've been denying them for the past 18 months. Peace

By: imhotep on March 07, 2007 at 04:04pm

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This is an exceptionally thoughtful look at the attempt to create a stable government in Palestine. Unfortunately, as you seem to have deduced, the Israeli government and our administration have zero interest in this happening. Nothing will happen until enough of our citizens become sufficiently concerned that the average member of congress can view this problem in terms of justice rather than placation of foolish supporters of the Israeli plan to eventually expand Israel over all worthwhile sections of Palestine. The call should be for justice beyond all else.

By: occupationmagazine on March 07, 2007 at 04:37pm

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