

Counterproductive U.S. “Advice” to Palestinians

Slide of Palestinian divide into the brink of a US sponsored civil war

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RAMALLAH. December 18, 2006. Regardless of good will or bad faith, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas’ decision to go without national consensus to early presidential and parliamentary elections was divisive, counterproductive and conforms to U.S.-Israeli plans to remove the Islamic Resistance Movement “ Hamas ” from power or pressure it into accepting what its rival Fatah had accepted: A peace process on their dictated terms and conditions.

“ I have decided to call for early presidential and parliamentary elections, ” Abbas said in a televised 90-minute speech on Saturday, in an effort to break a political nine-month deadlocked dialogue mainly bilateral between Fatah, the former ruling movement, and the incumbent Hamas. “ Let’s return to the people to have their say, and let them be the judge. ”

Early election was among several options floated with the aim of outmaneuvering Hamas including a referendum, declaring a state of emergency, calling for early legislative election, forming an emergency government or a government of independents or technocrats.

Chairman of the Higher Committee of the Central Election Commission (CEC), Hanna M. Nasser, said after a meeting with Abbas in the West Bank city of Ramallah on Sunday that the CEC needs 110 days after the issuance of the relevant presidential decree, which has yet to be issued, to organize the election; the CEC decided five days earlier to start updating the voter’s list as from mid-January 2007.

Close aide to Abbas and member of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Yasser Abed Rabbo, said he expected the election to take place in the next three months, but Saeb Erekat, another senior aide and chief negotiator, said they might not happen until June.

Accordingly a time space is still available to mediate the Palestinian divide; Abbas’ decision could be used as a pressure tactic to prod the political protagonists into a common ground either for a consensus to form a national unity government, in which case the elections become irrelevant, or a consensus to go to the polls, which precludes the slide into civil war.

Abbas could be once again maneuvering to pressure Hamas into giving in to the Israeli-U.S. conditions. “ My aim, ” he said, “ is a national unity government to lift this crisis and siege. ” This is, after all, the same Abbas who once threatened to hold a referendum on the prisoners’ document and changed his mind; and now he is threatening early elections and could change his mind.

However he hardly finished his speech than his decision backfired. Hamas legislators and cabinet ministers had boycotted Abbas’ speech and Hamas leaders immediately called his

declaration illegal and tantamount to a coup.

The Hamas-led Palestinian government of Haniyeh on Sunday refused Abbas' decision as "unconstitutional" and condemned his speech as divisive. Foreign Minister Mahmoud Zahar said that the call for new elections is illegal: "We will not participate ... If he (Abbas) is tired, he should resign and we'll have a presidential election." Haniyeh's senior adviser, Ahmed Yousef, was more blunt: "Abu Mazen (Abbas) is not part of the solution anymore. He is part of the problem now," he said. Reiterating an earlier similar warning by Zahar, Yousef had warned in Gaza on Saturday: "Today what we have heard from Abu Mazen is a call ... for a civil war."

But Abbas on Saturday played down the warning: "The removal of the government is not a recipe for civil war, as suggested by Zahar. Firing the government is a constitutional right that I can exercise when I want." Many political experts, even in his own Fatah movement, believe he only has the right to fire the current prime minister and cabinet, but under the Palestinian Basic Law, only the legislature can dissolve itself, these experts say, according to The New York Times.

Ahmed Baher, the deputy speaker of the Hamas-dominated Palestinian Legislature Council (PLC), said that Abbas "can't dismiss the legislative council. Such a decision violates the basic law." The PLC is like the government paralyzed and could not convene on Sunday. The Palestinian Basic Law, which acts as a constitution, has no provision for calling early elections. Fatah officials say Abbas can do so by issuing a presidential decree. Hamas says that would be illegal.

Abbas' decision however has only escalated the mutual incitement and the war of words is exacerbating an already tense situation, which spilled over to the streets in massive pro and con demonstrations across the West Bank and Gaza Strip and threatens to turn into armed mass expression of support or protest, the ideal environment for a flare up into a full-fledged civil war.

Abbas cited several reasons behind his decision: The divide arising from a two-head political system should be resolved, the national dialogue has reached an impasse and he has to act, the dual U.S.-Israeli economic siege on both Abbas and Hamas should be lifted sooner than later by a government mandated to do so by conforming to the conditions set by Israel and adopted by the Quartet of the U.S., U.N., EU and Russia, and to end the security chaos that has claimed 320 Palestinian lives, a figure reported by MP and former foreign minister Nabil Shaath to be 400 during the past three months.

Contributing Factors

On all accounts Abbas' decision is proving counterproductive. It was advised by the U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice when she met the Palestinian president in Jericho at the end of November and recommended by the PLO executive committee earlier this month.

The PLO recommendation could be a bad advice out of a good will to break through an impasse, although the PLO represents one side of the Palestinian divide vis-à-vis Hamas, but Rice's advice could not be judged except as given in bad faith.

Palestinian polarization into a brink of civil war is being fueled by several factors, but mainly by the active and direct U.S., Israeli and European contribution to the divide by taking

sides; this factor is too influential to allow in more constructive international influences. The absence of Arab mediation and the Arab League divide over several Middle Eastern hot issues is another important contributing factor. Internally the marginal role of factions other than Fatah and Hamas and the non-existence of a third mainstream party that could provide a balancing power to bridge the divide is a third factor.

The Israeli government, the U.S. administration and the European Union welcomed Abbas' move and pledged support; at the same time the Jordanian minister of information, an Egyptian statement, the U.N. Secretary General and Russia 's foreign ministry as well as Syria and Iran urged Palestinians to preserve their national unity and to de-escalate.

Israel and the U.S. are not neutral in the inter-Palestinian crisis. They were inciting the PLO and its autonomous Palestinian Authority (PA) to take on armed resistance to the Israeli 40-year old occupation long before Hamas assumed power. Their incitement was fleshed with more muscle after the Islamic movement came to power through ballots, which they themselves financed and monitored. Bringing in the EU to join them they imposed a devastating economic siege on both heads of the Palestinian leadership. However they spared their political and diplomatic siege to one head, the Hamas-led government, and selectively streamed in only humanitarian aid through the other head, which they continued to flesh with more muscle.

According to USINFO, Rice has said its administration will request from the Congress additional funding to support the mission of the U.S. security envoy, Army Major General Keith Dayton, who is leading an effort to train and equip Palestinian security forces controlled by Abbas since November last year; nonetheless Rice blamed the recent violence on Hamas' "inability to govern" and White House spokeswoman Jeanie Mamo denied on Friday that Washington was meddling in Palestinian "internal affairs!"

The U.S.-Israeli blockade did not start with the election of Hamas on January 25 but was imposed on the PA since the collapse of the Camp David summit talks in 2000; late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat was a prominent casualty. The hundreds of millions of dollars in tax monies owed to the PA were withheld by Israel before that. Even the Arab League financial pledges were not enough to bail out the salaries of the PA employees and the PA was compelled to borrow more than \$600 million from local banks before Hamas came to power.

In fact both heads of the Palestinian leadership are now under siege; the aim did not change since 2000: Give in to the will of the Israeli occupation or starve to yielding!

Regional Spillover Inevitable

The accelerating slide of the Palestinian divide into the brink of a low key civil war is a direct result of U.S. shirking of its responsibilities vis-à-vis the regional peace process, its unbalanced and biased foreign policy in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, its unwavering commitment to its strategic alliance with Israel at the expense of its Arab strategic allies who have proved their worth much better than the Jewish state in many regional conflicts during the past decades, and its preoccupation with other Middle East issues that are less central to the security of the region, which is pivotal and more vital for U.S. interests.

Washington is currently preoccupied with coordinating an "arch of moderation," which it hopes would lump up together Arab moderates and Israel to stand up to the so-called

Syrian-Iranian “axis of evil,” but is shooting its plan in the legs by dictating to the Palestinians and meddling in their internal affairs. How could any Arab state subscribe to such a scheme when the U.S. fails to provide for the success of the long-awaited and much-trumpeted Abbas summit meeting with the Israeli Prime minister Ehud Olmert?

Both U.S. allies Jordan and Egypt tried to add the resumption of the Palestinian –Israeli peace process to the agenda of President George W. Bush during his last visit to Amman; both hoped Bush could arrange for Abbas-Olmert meeting or at least would meet Abbas to pave the way for such a summit; instead he sent Rice to meet the Palestinian president in Jericho, where she denied him even promises to secure Israeli reciprocity to sustain the renewed Palestinian unilaterally-declared and honored two-year old truce and gave him in bad faith her bad advice to outmaneuver Hamas by going to polls, knowing beforehand her advice would only deepen the Palestinian divide and polarization.

It was a counterproductive advice. Sustaining the Palestinian divide and allowing it to slide into civil war would only defer the peace process indefinitely and prolong the suffering of the Palestinian people, but would not also spare the Arab as well as the Israeli neighbors the expected repercussions.

A full-blown civil war in the Occupied Palestinian Territories inevitably “would also boil over to us,” Ron Ben Yishai wrote in the Israeli daily Yedioth Ahronot on Dec. 15; a civil war would also thwart any attempt to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian crisis through negotiations and would almost certainly lead to the most radical elements taking over Palestinian society.

Egypt and Jordan may also be hit by unfriendly ricochets from this civil war, so they, just like Israel , have a clear interest in stopping this deterioration at this point before it completely spirals out of control, Ben Yishai warned.

How could such a development contribute to defusing the already explosive regional situation to serve U.S. interests as envisaged by the Baker-Hamilton report is a question for Bush and Rice to answer!

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