

The National Unity Government

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It is quite obvious that neither Ehud Olmert nor Mahmoud Abbas attained their goals as the just formed Unity government took office. President Abbas in implementing the Mecca agreement, attempted to bring to an end the isolation of the PA, but only partially succeeded. PM Olmert also sought to continue the boycott, but also failed to prevail. Only the Israeli government keeps the blanket embargo and the withholding of revenues. The foremost ally of Israel, the USA actually sent the American Consul-General in Jerusalem to meet the recently appointed Palestinian Finance Minister Dr Salam Fayyad. Russia, Norway and others fully recognized the new Unity government. Other countries followed the step of the USA, and announced that they will meet the non-Hamas ministers. The boycott as it was certainly came to an end, with signs of further erosion.

The release of captured soldier Gilad Shalit will work in favor of the Unity government, and would most probably allow for the extension of the ceasefire to the West Bank, and pave the way to better PA-Israel relations. Some Israeli political figures inside and outside the Israeli cabinet are starting to discuss the willingness of Israel to consider seriously exploring the call of Hamas since its election in January 2006 for a long term Hudna as a valid approach to de-escalate, as many feel that it could lead to further mutual steps to build confidence.

The budget of the PA government is still in doubt. Israel continue to withhold the sizable revenues it collects on behalf of the PA, which account to about 60% of the budget. Despite the knowledge that withholding the revenues hurts the Palestinian people and economy and does not affect the finances of the Hamas movement. Saudi Arabia promised to support the PA and break the embargo by promising to give a billion dollars. However, until now the banking restrictions imposed by the USA and Israel have prevented the Saudis in transferring the first installment, \$650 million.

The internal security in Palestine improved, the fear of civil war has vanished, but fatal clashes continue to take place in the Gaza strip. The new Minister of Interior is working closely with Hamas and Fateh to clamp down on lawlessness. His hands are full, the kidnapped BBC correspondent Johnston is still in captivity after two weeks, also no immediate sign of a prisoner exchange appears on the horizon to ameliorate tense conditions. The ability of Interior Minister Kawasmi to take charge, enforce law and order, reorganize the security forces under the command of the ministry, would be the first important achievement of the Unity government. On the internal front it would bring relief to the people, and on the Israeli side, it will show that finally the PA is able to provide credible security, this might help in extending the ceasefire.

RICE back to the region.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice started her new trip to the Middle East, with a meeting in Aswan with the Arab Quartet, the Foreign Ministers of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and the UAE. The Arab summit will take place this week in Riyadh, the Aswan meeting discussed the intended mechanism the Riyadh summit will create to activate the Arab peace initiative, in order to open the road to a regional meeting between the Arab side and Israel. The only other peace initiative on the table, the Road Map process has been dormant and has failed to bring the Israelis and Palestinians to the negotiating table. Additionally the PA and Israel internal political issues, prevent the development of a bilateral negotiating process. The Saudi initiative with an acceptable mechanism can lead toward a breakthrough.

Although nothing concrete has yet materialized as the direct result of the monthly shuttles of Condi Rice to the region, her persistence is to be commended, as she is trying to gradually erode intransigent positions on both sides and improvise new regional ones. All regional signals indicate that Dr Rice is capable to explore new avenues to negotiate an end to the conflict.

Certainly, this is not the case on the bilateral Israeli-Palestinian front, as the previous meetings Dr. Rice so far conducted bilaterally and trilaterally, failed to lead in the direction of negotiations. This is mostly due to the internal issues

existing in both parties. Olmert is fighting for his political life and does not dare to consider major issues like negotiating with the Palestinians or alienating Israeli settlers. In the Palestinian side, the cohabitation of Hamas and Fateh in the unity government is still at a delicate stage. The primary order of business is first internal security and it can only be tackled by the Interior Minister hitting hard on rowdy elements in Fateh, Hamas and others. Although Hamas in one short year, has moved politically, the international community is demanding clear positions. President Abbas sees in the Arab Peace Initiative, the most open road to engage Israel in regional negotiations, and in a way to help also overcome the reluctance of the Hamas movement, to recognize Israel explicitly, before ending the occupation.

The June 5 Initiative

Civil society activists and organizations are immersed in two activities. Immediately on how to support the Arab Peace Initiative to promote peace between the Arabs and Israel. At the moment feverish efforts are being exerted to organize activities, petitions and meetings urging the development of a workable mechanism that will allow the sides to meet in a regional setting, to look in earnest for a final settlement based on the two-state solution. The other occasion, in a couple of months, the Palestinian people will have been under occupation for 40 years, the longest occupation in modern history. On this sad occasion, and between 5 to 10 June, activities that call for an end of the occupation, will be spotlighted in a positive tone, by emphasizing the urgent call to arrive to a negotiated settlement based on Two States For Two People, Peace and Justice, and secure recognized borders for both nations. In Jerusalem, joint activities are being planned, demonstrating that civil society is joining hands in both countries in support of the two-state solution, emphasizing that this is the will of the majority in both nations.

A New Islamic Party is born

Professor Mohammed Dajani Of Al-Quds University held a meeting in Ramallah of the founders of a new moderate Islamic movement and party based on al-Wassatieh in Islam. Professor Dajani firmly believes that in the next three years by the time the next general elections will take place by the end of 2009, the new movement

will be able to run in the elections and attract enough votes from Hamas and Fateh, to become the third largest bloc in the political life of the Palestinian people. Wassatieh is based on the Holy Koran, and on moderation by taking the middle road. Many Islamic scholars in the Arab World and other Islamic countries advocate such course, to project the positive image of Islam globally.

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