

This Week in Palestine - Behind the News with Hanna Siniora : Obstacles facing the Unity Government

April 6, 2007

Jerusalem Times: Opinion

A month to the formulation of the National Unity government, the road to full recognition by Europe is still partially accomplished. The abduction of BBC correspondent Alan Johnston is not resolved, although the government security forces have pinpointed the Durmush family militia as the culprit. Lack of decisive action mainly sprung from the fear that the abductors might harm Johnston if the security forces use force to attempt to release the British journalist. But the continued stalemate harms the image of the Hamas-Fateh alliance and portrays it as ineffective to rein in lawless elements in Gaza. The prompt release of Johnston and an appropriate action against the abductors irrespective of how the abduction ends is one of the priorities of the Unity government.

During the meeting of the Foreign ministers of France and the PA, the release of the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in a prisoners exchange came up. This action, if fulfilled will help the process of full recognition of the Unity government by European countries, and would lead to improved relations with the USA and Israel. Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh should personally get involved to resolve this issue to demonstrate that the PA is taking control of security as well as law and order.

Internally, the clashes that are taking place between Hamas and Fateh should stop. The mounting reports undermine the stability and longevity of the present cabinet. Doubts about the future of the coalition prevent the world community from taking serious steps to recognize the government, and to remove the sanctions and economic embargo.

The sooner the President and Prime Minister come to terms on the composition of the National Security Council NSC, and unification of the various security forces under the NSC, the better the ability of the security forces to prevent kidnapping and to punish all elements that break the law. Thus far, the composition of the NSC has not been completed and the roles of the President, Prime Minister and Interior Minister are not clearly defined, creating loopholes for many to act irresponsibly and in contravention of law and order.

If these priorities are promptly addressed and Palestinian people and outside parties see positive results, this would lead to greater confidence in the Unity government and improved relations with the international community as well as with Israel.

On the Israeli Front

During her last visit, Dr. Rice announced that Abbas and Olmert agreed to meet twice a month on a regular basis. High on the agenda of discussion should be the extending of the ceasefire to the West Bank. This will help the Unity government to deal with militant groups in Gaza that continue to fire Kassam rockets at Israeli

sites near the border. Israel has to stop daily arrests and targeted killings in the West Bank in order to observe mutually a ceasefire in the West Bank and Gaza. Economically, the holding of PA revenues continues to harm the Palestinian economy. Freezing these revenues has harmed the Palestinian economy, caused the paralysis of most services by the PA ministries. The disaster that led to the death of several people and the flattening of the Bedouin village "Um Al-Naser" in Gaza as a result of the collapse of the reservoir of wastewater demonstrates that freezing funds hurts first and foremost the Palestinian people and not the political movements. Abbas and Olmert must reach an understanding in order to build confidence and achieve a working relationship; the Israeli government must unfreeze almost \$600 million that will go directly to the Finance Ministry under the able and transparent management of Dr. Salam Fayyad.

On the Political Front

The visit of Speaker Nancy Pelosi is a clear indication that the Democratic Party in Congress is implementing the advice of the Baker-Hamilton commission. This policy should apply in the PA, as in Syria and Lebanon. Instead of the threats of the neo-conservatives, a policy of meeting and discussing differences can bring better results. Unfortunately, the Bush administration still runs US policies until Jan 20, 2009. The only deviation so far, comes from the State Department. Bipartisan policy from the two parties that control US policies, would help reduce tensions in our region, and might lead to creating new political horizons for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as well as the whole region.

The Arab Peace Initiative

The Riyadh Summit reaffirmed the full backing of the Arab countries to the peace initiative raised by the Saudi King in Beirut in 2002. The Arab summit did not stop at that, it also discussed mechanisms to activate the Initiative. Israel PM Olmert welcomed the initiative and called for a regional meeting. Suspicions still abound, on the true intentions, many statements from the Palestinian and the Arab sides reflect that Olmert wants normalization without withdrawal, without political reciprocations. At this stage, the Olmert-Abbas meetings, and the role of Egypt and Jordan, who have peace treaties with Israel, as well as the role of the USA, EU, Russian and the UN (the quartet) is crucial in clearing the positions and help create the momentum for returning to the negotiation table.

A breakthrough is crucial for Israel and Palestine. The future of the two-State solution is in doubt, the longer the present stalemate, the less the chance that such a solution would generate emergence of more support of the bi-national state. This means prolonging of the conflict for generations. A fruitful dialogue between Abbas and Olmert that includes daily humanitarian issues as well as building a political horizon mutually acceptable based on the Arab peace initiative will help the Palestinian as well as the Israeli people avoid untold hardships. That first step starts at home, if Abbas and Olmert can reach an understanding, they can sell it to their people and to the rest of the world.

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