



## **ENDGAME FOR PALESTINE**

**By Harvey Sicherman**

On July 16, 2007, President Bush delivered a speech marking five years since his declaration of American support for a democratic Palestinian state. The original draft, scheduled a month earlier, had to accommodate an untoward event: the violent seizure of Gaza by Hamas, the Islamist Palestinian party. Hamas is armed and financed by Syria and Iran; its declared objective is the destruction of Israel. This event, like Hamas' electoral victory in January 2006, seemingly repudiated Bush's policy.

The President, however, has now tripled his bet that the Palestinian cause can be rescued from the Islamists, once again through a partnership with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, to be reinforced by former British Prime Minister Tony Blair's mission for the Quartet (United States, Russia, European Union, United Nations) and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's mission for a regional conference. This devilishly complex diplomacy will require more skill--and luck--than Washington has enjoyed thus far. Not the least of the complexities is the timetable (roughly the coming fall), which coincides with a likely crisis over Iraq. But, as will be seen, the strategy also depends on a solution to the pressing military problem exposed by last summer's Lebanon War.

### **BUSH'S PALESTINE, AND ARAFAT'S**

Since June 2002, as an essential element of an overall settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, American policy has sought to foster the creation of a democratic Palestinian state that is opposed to terrorism. On July 16, President Bush reiterated this objective with a fresh embrace of President Abbas (popularly known as Abu Mazen) as the man to do the job. This was his third endorsement of Abu Mazen.

In 2003, and again in 2005, Abu Mazen was depicted as the key to reigniting a peace process that depended on two partners, one Palestinian and one Israeli, who were willing and able to reach a deal. Their risks in doing so were to be reduced by American and international assistance. This formula had worked well between Egypt and Israel, and Israel and Jordan, delivering sturdy peace treaties that have survived assassinations and regional conflicts.

Although the 1993 Oslo Accords between the PLO's Yasser Arafat and Israel's Yitzhak Rabin appeared to replicate the pattern, the United States attributed the failed Camp David Summit of 2000 and the subsequent intifada largely to Arafat's malevolence. Outgoing President Bill Clinton warned his successor against trusting the Palestinian's intentions, a warning reinforced by Arafat's behavior in January 2002 over an Iranian arms shipment intercepted by Israel. Bush's support for a Palestinian state in June 2002, originating partly in the aftermath of 9/11, was therefore hedged with a demand for a democracy with leaders "not compromised by terrorism." After the swift overthrow of Saddam in spring 2003, Arafat had been forced to accept Abu Mazen, a longtime aide turned critic, as Prime Minister. Despite public approval by Bush, Israel's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Jordan's King Abdullah, and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, however, Abu Mazen resigned four months later, mainly over Arafat's continued control of the security services.

The United States embraced Abu Mazen a second time following his election as President of the Palestinian Authority early in 2005, Arafat having died two months earlier. This time the Palestinian brought to the table a demand for renewed final status negotiations; a partial cease-fire including Hamas, bought at the price of allowing Hamas to participate in Palestinian local and legislative elections without having to endorse the Oslo agreement; and a promise to the Palestinians of reform under the slogan of "one authority, one law and one gun."

These words were belied by events. The cease-fire had a big exemption for the Syrian-sponsored Islamic Jihad, which promptly began firing rockets on southern Israeli border towns. The promises of reform fell victim to Fatah party corruption and rivalries. Moreover, Prime Minister Sharon, then in the painful process of executing his unilateral disengagement from Gaza, regarded Abu Mazen as a "plucked chicken," meaning a man incapable of imposing order. The Bush Administration,

anxious to obtain Israeli withdrawal and riding a wave of early successes in electioneering around the region, contented itself with post-disengagement economic arrangements and an insistence on Palestinian elections even with Hamas participation. With his party in disarray and Hamas taking the credit for the Gaza withdrawal, Abu Mazen went very reluctantly to the polls.

Sharon's incapacitation and Hamas' January 2006 victory dealt a double blow to U.S. policy. Apparently, Arafat's Palestine was to be displaced not by Bush's democratic vision, represented by Abu Mazen, but rather by Hamas, an Islamist party (its ideology not far from that of bin Laden's) and increasingly influenced by Syria and Iran. The Palestinians had elected a living contradiction, giving the presidency to a man who recognized Israel, renounced violence, and supported Oslo, and the government to a party that repudiated Oslo and sought Israel's destruction through terrorism.

### SMOTHERING THE BABY, PART I

Following Hamas' victory, Washington sought to rally a coalition opposed to the new government. The United States, Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and Fatah sought to smother the baby with minimal violence. They failed. Abbas drifted along, apparently believing that Hamas respected his presidency and would stop short of civil war. Egypt tried to mediate but did not seal the Gaza-Egypt border against arms and money smuggling. The American-sponsored international embargo and Israel's withholding of tax revenues crippled what was left of the war-ravaged PA economy, but international humanitarian assistance kept the population supplied with necessities.

Still, this war of attrition might have worked if Hamas itself had not upped the ante by kidnapping an Israeli soldier in a cross-border raid on June 25, 2006. Then on July 12, Hezbollah captured two more on the Israeli-Lebanese border; its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, indicated he was the new address for all prisoner release negotiations. Suddenly Arafat's most precious legacy--a PA not dominated by other states -- was forfeit to the Hamas military wing in Damascus headed by Khaled Meshal and behind Hezbollah, Syria and Iran.

When the Israelis responded to these events with a large-scale military action in Lebanon, the United States and others, notably Saudi Arabia, expected the Israeli Defense Forces to lick Hezbollah quickly without wrecking Lebanon, and through an embarrassing defeat of their expensively coddled surrogate, to paste Syria and Iran. But the Olmert government picked a military strategy that relied primarily on air power. A month later, it had not achieved its goals. In Gaza, Hamas tried to duplicate southern Lebanon's mix of well-trained terrorists operating amidst a civilian population, using rockets to disrupt Israeli cities.<sup>1</sup>

Disappointed by Israel and anxious to reverse the tide, the Bush Administration turned anew to Abbas, this time to assist him in a confrontation with Hamas--to strangle rather than smother. Encouraged by the alarm this caused in Egypt, Jordan, and especially Saudi Arabia, Washington sought Riyadh's cooperation in the coming showdown. But Saudi King Abdullah had a different objective: it was not the triumph of Fatah he sought, for he had little confidence in Abbas, but rather the detachment of Hamas from Iran through a rapprochement between Hamas and Fatah.

At Saudi invitation, Haniyeh, Meshal, and Abu Mazen met at Mecca. The King arranged a compromise on February 8, 2007, that included shared power, and he underwrote the deal with a billion-dollar pledge. Hamas Prime Minister Haniyeh had only to "respect" previous PA agreements. The dealmakers were photographed praying together at Islam's holiest mosque and then sent back to the PA to make it work. This was coupled with a revival of a Saudi-sponsored Arab League peace plan dating from March 2002. Olmert had some pleasant words for this, but the parts dealing with borders, Jerusalem, and refugees were obviously unacceptable to Israel. Haniyeh abstained on the vote to revive the plan when the League met on March 28-29 in Riyadh.

King Abdullah seemed bolder than his predecessors but, in fact, he was following a well-scripted Saudi pattern. In principle, Riyadh had no objections to an Islamic state, and had never liked Henry Kissinger's step-by-step approach pairing Israel and an Arab state in negotiations under American auspices. The Saudis were now asking the United States and the Quartet to recognize Hamas' legitimacy as the price of prying it away from Iran and to abandon the direct negotiations among the parties for a solution that might be imposed from above, providing, of course, that Israel could be brought to terms. That was Washington's assignment.

There was embarrassment and anger all around. Abu Mazen, who had promised no deals unless the Israeli soldier was released along the lines of an Egyptian scheme for prisoner exchange, had failed again. Egypt and Jordan, too, were not enthusiastic about Saudi leadership of a peace initiative. They hastened to become the principal interlocutors between Israel and the Arab League plan. When the Saudis declined to participate in what might have been a new international conference with Israel, the Olmert government also lost its enthusiasm.

The Mecca Agreement produced a brief pause in the Fatah-Hamas fighting, which had already cost hundreds of lives. Soon the shooting resumed. Hamas' executive force, formed in direct contravention to an Abbas decree, took the offensive while the Fatah leaders quarreled and dithered. The U.S. military mission, headed by General Keith Dayton, had concocted a plan to unify and train Abu Mazen's forces, anticipating a showdown. But Hamas struck first. After driving most Fatah leaders from

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<sup>1</sup> See Sichertman, "Lebanon: The Two-in-One Crisis," Aug. 8, 2006, at <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/20060808.middleeast.sichertman.lebanon2in1.html>.

Gaza by threatening their families, Hamas systematically assaulted Fatah positions beginning on June 7. The operation was well planned, very specific and merciless, including the execution of civilians and public assaults on symbols of PA authority. Five days later, it was over.

## **SMOTHER II**

Yasser Arafat's house was among those looted and wrecked in the aftermath of the Hamas victory. For in a way, what happened in Gaza meant the end of the Arafat state-in-becoming. There was now an alternative to the nationalists: the Islamists.

Hamas can be expected to start well. As demonstrated in Kabul and Mogadishu, Islamists know how to suppress clan and gang warfare. In this case, Arafat's system of bribery and balancing, so subversive of order, will be ended; a few bloody executions have already made the point. So, to the shame of Fatah and its Western supporters, personal security will probably improve dramatically compared to the West Bank. Hamas has already gone through a propagandistic "liberation" of the BBC journalist Alan Johnston. Nonetheless, as with the Taliban in Kabul and the Islamic Courts in Mogadishu, the imposition of order will soon be accompanied by the Islamist version of society. And that version also decrees "jihad" against the infidels, which now includes Fatah.

In the month since Gaza's fall, the same cast of characters that failed to smother Hamas before has determined to try it yet again. Bush's speech was therefore an attempt to chart a new and more effective course for the next round. The President and his advisors clearly believe that Gaza has clarified the choice. It is no longer a choice between Hamas and Arafat's legacy, the one standing for purity and order, the other for corruption and chaos, but rather one between a violent Islamism and a peaceful democratic society. At the heart of the presidential rhetoric therefore is the Palestinian choice.

Paean to the democratic impulse in humanity aside, the Administration seeks to "improve" the offer by persuading the Palestinians that the American way is better than the Hamas way. For the third time, then, Bush has embraced Abu Mazen as his standard bearer.

Is this a triumph of hope over experience? Sometimes weak leaders find the courage when their demise is the alternative. Abu Mazen began to do things he had not done before. He appointed the guardian of financial probity, Salam Fayyad, as Prime Minister of a revised, more technocratic cabinet, signaling a new seriousness about effective government. And for the first time, the Israelis had a Palestinian ally in the deliberate suppression of Hamas' operations in the West Bank.

The Israelis also behaved differently. Olmert's government joined the United States and European Union in transferring tax receipts to the Palestinian Authority. Two hundred-fifty prisoners were released, all Fatah. And the IDF reduced its operations, also allowing a kind of amnesty for some of the most wanted al-Aqsa Brigades gunmen as part of a joint plan with the PA to disarm a militia that Hezbollah has been trying to infiltrate. Egypt, too, joined with its own campaign to seal Gaza more effectively. An embarrassed Saudi government renounced its mediation between Hamas and Fatah and King Abdullah paid a highly public visit to Jordan, indicating that bad blood between the Saudis and Hashemites notwithstanding, the Hashemites were preferable to Hamas.

## **TRIPLING THE BET**

The obvious and early steps having been taken, Bush proposes to triple the bet that the new urgency provoked by Gaza can be translated into a rescue of the Palestinian cause. The method connects three interlocking circles, each on a kind of timetable charged by a new special envoy and an international conference.

(1) *Increasing the Heat*: The first is to add to the pressure produced by Gaza. Olmert and Abbas have already figured out that they must help each other. Fayyad will be the point man for the detail of producing an effective Palestinian government while Abbas will reserve himself for truly presidential business, namely, negotiations over final status. Olmert's response indicates that Israel can travel some distance on both these dimensions, easing the restrictions on the Palestinians as they perform, and engaging Abbas on "principles" for final agreement. To judge this progress, Bush proposed another variation of Washington's latest diplomatic fad, "benchmark diplomacy." None of these benchmarks, including demands on Israel with respect to settlements and checkpoints, is new, but left unsaid is the sequence of stages, whether they must be taken in tandem, and which are most important.

(2) *Stiffening the Noodle*: The second circle is the mission led by Tony Blair, an energetic personality whose enthusiasm for the two-state solution has not yet been soured by encounters with reality. His objective, backed by the Quartet, may be described as "stiffening the noodle": superintending the invention of a serious Palestinian government capable of assuming sovereignty. Nothing in the Palestinian record since Oslo suggests that anything looms on the "political horizon" save a disastrously failed state. No one needs another one of those. The measure of Blair's success will therefore be whether the Palestinian Authority, shorn of Gaza, can establish Abu Mazen's original promise of "one authority, one law, one gun." These are elementary criteria for statehood.

(3) *Enlarging the Circle*: Third and finally, Bush proposes to enlarge the circle of peacemakers through an international conference chaired by Secretary Rice. The idea conjures up the Madrid Conference of 1991 that assembled Israel and its immediate neighbors following the successful U.S.-led war to free Kuwait. As it turned out, the Madrid framework allowed the parties to make peace with the American initiative rather than with each other; both the Oslo Accords and the Israeli-

Jordanian Peace Treaty were achieved outside its framework, while the Israeli-Syrian negotiations failed. This time around, Bush is invoking the Arab League Plan originated by the Saudis in the hope that the circle will be much broader and that the desire to deprive Iran of influence will spur the parties toward agreement. Two parties, however, are not likely to appear as they did in 1991: Syria, now self-excluded, arguing instead for an indirect negotiation with Israel, preconditioned on a mediator and Israeli agreement to withdraw to the 1967 lines; and Russia, excluded by the United States from the co-chairmanship, possibly to keep the lately mischievous Putin within the Quartet. And, of course, only the Palestinians who recognize Israel, renounce violence, and commit to Oslo's principles will be invited.

The prospects of such an international conference increase pressure on everyone, including Washington, to accelerate Israeli-Palestinian cooperation and the Palestinian Authority's rehabilitation. Should such a conference be organized, one can expect the President himself to inaugurate it, as did his father sixteen years ago.

#### THE ENDGAME'S MISSING DIMENSIONS

Bush's triple bet--in effect his endgame for alleviating if not ending the long-running Arab-Israeli conflict -- is a long shot. The United States does not ride high now in the Middle East; Iran and its allies are pressing hard; and the President does not command much support in the region, or for that matter, in Washington. Moreover, the two horses dragging the chariot of peace, Olmert and Abbas, are very lame. American gambles in the midst of adversity, however, are not new; in many ways, the local governments prefer it that way. Nor are tactics and timing the real obstructions to success: those determined to reach agreement manage to overcome clumsy diplomacy; and the timing is always bad for someone.

There are two more significant obstacles. One is that the parties are unlikely to agree on the most critical issues. Bush levitated above this thorny ground by advancing principles for a final agreement that invoke all the semi-theology of the conflict: an undefined "security" for Israel; a "viable and contiguous" Palestinian state; territorial settlement "with mutually agreed borders reflecting previous lines and current realities, and mutually agreed adjustments." These do not exactly translate in the Arab League and Palestinian position of Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 lines; Jerusalem to the Palestinians, and the refugees' "right of return." Nor do they endorse Israel's version of a viable and contiguous Palestine. On this subject, Bush sought safety by attributing to both Olmert and Sharon the view that Israel's future should not include "continuing occupation of the West Bank." Beyond these details, Bush emphasized that Palestinians and Israelis bore responsibility for resolving the issues themselves. This was a strong reaffirmation of the two-party plus international help formula for peacemaking.

Behind such sonorous pronouncements lay some disagreeable facts. After six years of intifada and the Gaza results, Olmert cannot offer what Ehud Barak might have offered in 2000. And Abu Mazen will no doubt cling to the Arab League consensus to justify any agreement. The United States is therefore betting heavily that urgency and emergency will turn Israelis and Palestinians in the direction of the incipient late Clinton era compromises circa December 2000-January 2001. Should this not happen, the best that can be done will be to draw out a discussion of "principles" while improving the situation on the ground.

The second obstacle, however, is one that Bush does not address at all. Hamas is excluded as the Smother II campaign proceeds. Arguments to "engage" Hamas, to use another faddish cliché, are crippled by what Hamas has to offer and the consequences of doing so. Hamas' proposed long-term cease-fire with Israel, like its earlier cease-fires, is likely to be many things but not a total cease-fire. And under cover of this arrangement, Hamas will expect to ease its isolation while consolidating its position. Indeed, many observers expect that, rather than see this happen, Abu Mazen may pocket what he can get from the United States and Israel preparatory to renegotiating another unity government, this time on terms more favorable to Fatah.

More significantly, the U.S. policy has no answer to the most important recent military developments, the real missing dimension in his speech. This is the view, shared by Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran, and Syria, that they have found a way to deter if not negate Israel's military advantages, thereby enabling them to damage Israel with relative impunity. By deploying well-trained troops that use Palestinian civilians as shields and Israeli civilians as the targets, largely through missile fire, Hamas hopes to duplicate Hezbollah's feat during the second Lebanon War. Then Israel hesitated fatally between annihilating Hezbollah positions in the south with firepower because of the probable high civilian casualties or using Israeli infantry, also with probably high casualties. The ultimate Israeli sanction, the reoccupation of Gaza, and resumption of responsibilities there, is its own self-deterrent. Yet, without a military solution to this challenge, Hamas will be able to bring about a violent interruption of any negotiation that looks like success. Bush's triple bet and to some extent his longer plans in the region therefore depend on a fourth bet, namely, that Israel will find an answer to this strategic dilemma that reinforces rather than disrupts the diplomacy.

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