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The Palestinians and the New American and Israeli Administrations

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The American pressure which forced Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu to accept the two-state solution principle strengthened the status of the Palestinian National Authority as a state-on-the-way, but did not by itself create sufficiently appropriate conditions for renewing the peace process. Moreover, the increasing strength of the Islamist current and decline of nationalist groups among the Palestinian society has continued apace. One outcome for Palestinian society has been the de facto emergence of two separate ruling structures: 1) in the West Bank, led by the Fatah “Old Guard”; and 2) in the Gaza Strip, led by Hamas. Another development has been declining support among the Palestinian public for the two-state solution. A third has been the PLO’s loss, amongst portions of the Palestinian public, of its decades-old status as their only legitimate representative.

The Fatah movement has become weakened in recent years, organizationally and ideologically. Up until now, it has not succeeded in resolving its internal splits, or in proving to the public that its political approach remains relevant. Fatah controls the PA, a body whose continued existence is desired by Israel and the international community. However, it has lost the support of a majority of the public, and with it, undermined the PLO’s historic standing as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. Bureaucratically, the PA is a stable mechanism, and over the last year has made significant strides in cracking down on terror

networks and imposing law and order. It is guided by the assumption that its status and continued existence are threatened by Hamas, which is determined to extend its control over Palestinian society to the West Bank. Over the last year, the security organs of the PA have stepped up their monitoring of Hamas's political, military and social welfare activities in the West Bank. The PA is apprehensive that the international community will recognize Hamas, thus affording it a greater degree of legitimacy among the Palestinian public at the PA's expense.

Hamas, which established firm control in Gaza and survived the IDF's punishing onslaught, operates from the premise that Israel and Egypt seek to weaken its hold there in order to restore the PA's authority. Hamas does not recognize Abu Mazen as the legal president of the PA, or the legitimacy of Salam Fayyad's government. It is determined to entirely neutralize Fatah's operative ability in Gaza through the use of force, and to deter the PA from repressing its activists and institutions in the West Bank. Up until now, the two sides have been unable to settle their differences through a national dialogue mediated and sponsored by Egypt. Cairo hopes that the advent of the Obama Administration and its new approach to the region will stimulate a positive dynamic in the intra-Palestinian dialogue, weaken Hamas's bargaining power, and result in an agreement, with July 7 being the designated date for its unveiling. In response, Hamas has notified Egypt that if it attempts to impose its position on the parties, the agreement won't hold water.

The Hamas leadership is encouraged by the support of Islamist elements in Jordan and Egypt, and also by what it views as growing recognition of its legitimacy by the international community. It is attempting to present its positions regarding the conflict with Israel in a sophisticated and complex manner, while downplaying its primary political goal at this stage: halting the process begun at Oslo in which the Palestinian question and its resolution is limited to the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and returning the Palestinian Diaspora to center stage, with the right of return once again becoming the key issue in the conflict.

The Hamas leadership seeks to prove that the peace process is irrelevant since Israel is not interested in a political settlement. It wants to focus its energies on the societal sector and prevent an additional military confrontation with Israel that could result in the collapse of its rule. It is acting to rein in the various organizations in Gaza and prevent them from carrying out attacks against Israel, particularly rocket fire. Senior Hamas officials explain that Hamas will maintain the 'calm' as long as it serves the interest of the Palestinian people. They point to the fact that Israel also scrupulously observes the 'calm' and acts, via the Egyptians, to extend it,

and that, ironically, Israel's right-wing government keeps open the crossings to Gaza even during sporadic episodes of rocket fire into Israel.

Hamas's attempts to begin repairing and rebuilding the Gaza Strip after the destruction during the winter war are being delayed by the lack of building materials such as iron and concrete, whose import into the Strip Israel is blocking (the crossing points are open for humanitarian purposes). Hamas expects that the pressure being exerted by the US Administration on Israel to ease the embargo on prohibited goods will produce tangible results. It also seeks to rebuild its military strength and to develop it along the lines of a proper army, which in the long run will act as a credible defense force. Bolstered by its rocket arm, Hamas's army would ideally deter Israel from launching a broad offensive, and thus prevent the destruction of the administrative and military structures and symbols of its authority. The Hamas leadership believes that the creation of such a deterrent would bring stability and calm for a lengthy period without necessitating a political agreement with Israel, thus enabling it to deepen its rule over the Gaza region while undertaking its reconstruction.

Abu Mazen and the Fatah leadership emphasize the political opening being generated by a US administration determined to bring Israel and the Palestinians to the negotiating table. They hope that Washington will stand by its demand for a total building freeze in all settlements, remove Netanyahu's conditions for resuming the peace process and reject his position making the establishment of a Palestinian state dependent on its demilitarization and on recognizing Israel as a Jewish state. The Fatah leadership expects the Administration not to interpret its rejection of this recognition as a purely Palestinian matter but as an all-Arab position. It declares its adherence to the Arab peace initiative that emphasizes the Arab world's commitment to a two-state solution, and expects Israel to adopt the initiative as is.

If these expectations are realized, they are liable to improve Fatah's position in the national dialogue with Hamas and in advance of the coming Palestinian parliamentary and presidential elections, scheduled for January 2010. However, in the event that the US prefers to avoid a confrontation with Israel and reach a compromise with Netanyahu, and finds a formula through which the international community recognizes Hamas as a legitimate political movement and ruling authority in Gaza, Hamas will be strengthened, and Fatah's claim to be the national representative of the Palestinians will be correspondingly weakened.

