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Reconciling with Hamas? Abbas's Hedge Against a Failed Peace Process

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On June 4, Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas marked the anniversary of the 1967 War by making a surprise call for dialogue with Hamas. In response to multiple challenges to his authority -- impasse on the peace process, ongoing dissent within Fatah, and regional pressure to resolve the internal Palestinian conflict -- Abbas has abandoned his demands for Hamas to return Gaza to its pre-June 2007 condition and apologize for its violent coup. However, a gulf remains between Hamas and Fatah, and it is unlikely that renewed dialogue can bridge the gap. Abbas's move may be an effort to pressure the United States to become more involved, and to maintain a fallback position if peace is not achieved. Accordingly, his call to Hamas should be seen as tactical, rather than a strategic, turning point toward Palestinian reconciliation.

Background

Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Salih sponsored the most recent effort to reconcile Fatah and Hamas earlier this year. The Yemeni Initiative proposed the following: return Gaza to its pre-Hamas takeover status; hold new presidential and legislative elections; implement the 2005 Cairo agreement and its key provision of restructuring the Palestine Liberation Organization to include Hamas and Islamic Jihad; carry out the 2007 Mecca agreement and its agreement to establish a unity government that would divide official posts between Hamas and Fatah; and restructure the Palestinian security services without regard to factional loyalties.

When Fatah and Hamas representatives met in March to discuss the Yemeni Initiative, they disagreed on timing. Hamas insisted that its integration into the Palestinian Authority be implemented before yielding Gaza, while Fatah demanded the return of Gaza prior to any discussion. Yet President Salih convinced the two sides to sign the "Sanaa Declaration," which was a defeat for Fatah's position. Afterwards, Abbas and his advisors attempted to distance themselves from the negotiations, but the Arab League adopted the initiative in its March meeting in Damascus.

For its part, Hamas quickly welcomed Abbas's June 4 remarks. Former Palestinian prime minister Ismail Haniyeh called for establishing a committee to prepare the agenda for dialogue, and requested that the Arab League sponsor the talks.

Abbas's Shift

Abbas initially chose to boycott Hamas after the June 2007 coup, and aimed for an all-encompassing agreement with Israel. The U.S. call for a "political horizon" made Abbas think he could use a diplomatic achievement with Israel to challenge Hamas in future elections. Consequently, Abbas ignored Hamas's rejection of his mandate to negotiate with Israel, insisting that a diplomatic breakthrough would yield dividends in the ongoing political confrontation.

Since the November Annapolis conference, however, Abbas's optimism has dipped. Reports suggest that

Israeli and Palestinian differences over land and refugees have narrowed considerably, but at the same time a breakthrough remains distant. The lead Palestinian negotiator, Ahmed Qurei, recently declared it would take "a miracle" to achieve an agreement by the end of the year -- a sentiment echoed by Palestinian prime minister Salam Fayad. Adding to Abbas's frustration, the corruption investigation against Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert is threatening his government. Since much of Abbas's confidence stems from his personal relationship with Olmert, the departure of the prime minister would signal a freeze in peace talks, even if his Kadima party managed to retain control of the government.

Moreover, Abbas has grown increasingly disappointed with U.S. diplomatic efforts and Israel's continuing settlement expansion. Several reports suggest that Abbas was so pessimistic after his two meetings with President Bush on April 23 and May 17 that he threatened to resign. Although his is unlikely to follow through with his threat, Abbas may feel that an overture to Hamas would effectively galvanize American diplomacy.

Beyond the peace process, Abbas is facing a growing revolt within Fatah. Rather than mediating between its leadership and the Fayad government, Abbas has focused on placating the two sides in order to avoid an outright confrontation. Since Fatah's agenda will now be consumed with the prospect of reconciling with Hamas, Abbas's call for renewed dialogue has once again postponed the conflict.

Abbas has also lost significant popularity because of the faltering peace process, and may believe the pursuit of unity will gain him public accolades. According to a March poll by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, Haniyeh and Abbas had nearly identical levels of support in a hypothetical presidential election (47 percent favoring Haniyeh and 46 percent preferring Abbas). But in the days following his call for renewed dialogue, the president's poll numbers rose to 52 percent while Haniyeh's fell to 40 percent. Even though he has declared repeatedly that he will not run for another term, Abbas is clearly sensitive about his popularity, particularly since he will likely face challenges to his September 2007 decree that extended his current term (set to end this January) until the next legislative elections.

In addition to domestic political concerns, Abbas's call for renewed dialogue is also a response to growing regional and international pressure for Palestinian reconciliation, now heightened by the recent Doha agreement between Lebanese factions. Egypt wants reconciliation in order to reopen the Rafah crossing, while the Saudis are seeking to improve their relations with Hamas to counter Iran's influence. Abbas followed his June 4 announcement by meeting Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah and requesting that Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak host future talks.

Limited Prospects for Reconciliation

Despite the overtures to Hamas, Abbas's preferred strategy remains advancing a peace agreement. Moreover, the prospects for a full reconciliation with Hamas remain limited since the two parties remain far apart on the basic terms of dialogue, let alone a final settlement. Hamas leaders insist that there is nothing political to discuss since prior agreements have already covered the outstanding issues. Fatah, however, views the return of Gaza as a key precondition for further discussions at which point all issues will be reopened for debate.

Abbas's call for a renewed dialogue should be viewed more as a hedging strategy against the prospect of a failed peace process rather than a well-formulated plan for Palestinian reconciliation. No doubt, he is using the possibility of dialogue with Hamas as a way to pressure the United States to increase its efforts on Israeli-Palestinian peace. And if Abbas concludes that his legacy will not be defined by bringing peace with Israel, then he may turn his attention to restoring Palestinian unity.

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