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In the Wake of the Hamas Coup: Rethinking America's 'Grand Strategy' for the New Palestinian Authority

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Hamas's military takeover of Gaza is the sort of clarifying act of violence that should trigger, among all relevant parties, a period of reassessment. So far, however, it is not apparent that the Bush administration has taken a critical look at the policies that failed -- in the pre-Hamas period -- to help develop the Palestinian Authority (PA) into a truly effective, accountable, transparent government, or -- in recent months -- to impede Hamas's rise or strengthen the forces arrayed against it. Before Washington proceeds too far down the path of propping up President Mahmoud Abbas and resuscitating Fatah without reflecting on how U.S. action (or inaction) contributed to the current situation, the administration should revisit the basic principles underlying U.S. relations with the PA.

In this context, pursuit of an Israeli-Palestinian "political horizon" may in fact run counter to the interests and preferences of both sides. Instead, investing in an Arab-Palestinian political horizon -- including early negotiation on the outline of an eventual Jordanian-Palestinian confederation -- may be more realistic, valuable, and effective.

Policy Context

The diplomatic consensus that emerged after Hamas routed Fatah in Gaza is remarkable: the United States, European Union, Israel, Egypt, and Jordan all agreed that the appropriate strategy for advancing peace is to invest their combined energies in supporting a leader who now has the unique experience of losing to Hamas at the ballot box and on the battlefield. With the resurgence of realism in American foreign policy, it is surprising that so few have questioned the wisdom of placing our national bets on Abbas once again. Clearly, the lack of obvious and viable alternatives dominates U.S. decisionmaking. At the same time, what President Bush termed, in a different context, the "soft bigotry of low expectations" also plays a role. To put the U.S. position starkly, conventional wisdom holds that Abbas is all we have, therefore we have to make do.

To Abbas's credit, he has responded to the embarrassment and anger at his second Hamas-led defeat -- and to a reported assassination attempt -- with a vigor and resolve that few believed he could muster. He has taken positive steps, including sacking Hamas prime minister Ismail Haniyeh, banning Hamas militias, imposing new rules requiring nongovernmental organizations to reapply for licenses in an effort to stop Hamas financing, and forming a new cabinet long on competence and short on ideology. Perhaps most important, he has marked a line in the sand with his decision to label Hamas leaders "murderous terrorists" and accuse them of trying to assassinate him in the same manner as Lebanon's slain ex-prime minister Rafiq Hariri.

Of course, the first two measures have little practical effect, as no presidential directive can change the reality that Hamas controls Gaza. Moreover, the reality of Arab politics is that even leaders who are at each other's throats often reconcile when it is in their interests, if only half-heartedly. Still, Abbas's actions and deeds have, at least for now, clarified the situation.

Contrary Explanations, Different Policies

In Washington, however, the impact of the Hamas coup on U.S. peace process policy is not yet clear. So far, the administration has responded with the main elements of its previously failed policy: some security reform, assistance, and training, though no demand for the transformation of the PA/Fatah security establishment; some economic assistance, though no requirement for root-and-branch change in the PA's governance or fight against corruption; some diplomatic prodding, though neither a full-scale invigoration of the Quartet Roadmap endorsed by the United States, UN, European Union, and Russia in 2003, nor a full-scale push for speedy diplomatic progress. This course of action -- which is almost sure to achieve the same results as before -- seems to be the middle ground between two larger, alternative strategies.

One strategy argues that the root cause of Fatah's defeat was that the faction could not credibly convince Palestinians that it was capable of delivering a political settlement with Israel that met the minimal Palestinian political requirements. Consequently, without the empowerment of this political horizon, Fatah foot soldiers had nothing to fight for, Fatah loyalists had nothing to believe in, and ordinary Palestinians had no particular reason to offer Fatah another opportunity to govern. According to this view, then, protecting the West Bank from Gaza's fate requires all parties to press forward with Israeli-Palestinian permanent-status negotiations that would result in a breakthrough agreement on Palestinian statehood -- an accord whose implementation may take years to complete but whose negotiation could be fairly rapid.

The key implication of this line of argument is that internal Palestinian issues -- governance, accountability, transparency, effectiveness, corruption, commitment to fighting terrorism from within the PA, and so forth -- are less important ingredients of Fatah's defeat than was the failure to achieve results in the peace process. This argument implicitly sets aside the Roadmap's strategy of phases and benchmarks. In addition, it has already taken on a practical policy dimension with the administration's reluctance to endorse a carefully designed set of conditions for the disbursement of aid to the new PA government.

Ironically, this approach runs counter to the most common explanation for Hamas's victory in January 2006 legislative elections: that voters cast ballots for Hamas not because of the "national" issue but because of their outrage at Fatah's corruption and incompetence. Indeed, the same people who advocate the "political horizon is essential" argument today were those who most vocally argued that peace-process differences were not the motivating factor behind Hamas's victory eighteen months ago.

Why dismiss Hamas's 2006 victory as a result of Fatah corruption, but respond to the Hamas coup of 2007 with a call for high-level diplomacy? The reason for this inconsistency may be that the U.S. administration is reluctant to contemplate the enormity of the problem it faces. It is a problem that has really not changed much since President Bush identified it and offered a series of solutions in his landmark Rose Garden address five years ago this week: "I call on the Palestinian people to elect new leaders, leaders not compromised by terror," he said. "A Palestinian state will never be created by terror -- it will be built through reform. And reform must be more than cosmetic change, or veiled attempt to preserve the status quo. True reform will require entirely new political and economic institutions, based on democracy, market economics, and action against terrorism."

If the administration so chooses, those words, written for the era of Yasser Arafat, could animate "grand strategy" for relations with the PA in the post-Hamas coup era. In practical terms, the principles enunciated by the president in 2002 would mean the following:

- (1) Abbas should not only outlaw Hamas's extralegal militia (the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades), but also ban Fatah's own extralegal militia (the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades) and truly implement a policy of government monopoly on force;
- (2) Abbas should not only appoint credible ministers (such as new prime minister Salam Fayad), but also commit to credible mechanisms to ensure that no U.S. funds find their way to either Hamas-controlled Gaza or

the various PA and Fatah political, cultural, educational, and media institutions that still advocate violence against Israel and Jews;

(3) Abbas should not only call for forward progress on diplomacy, but also implement the full range of existing Oslo-era commitments, which address a vast array of issues from security cooperation to legitimate political activity. For example, given Hamas's coup in Gaza, what is the legal status of the organization as a whole and its ancillary institutions in the West Bank?

Devising and implementing policies based on this assessment of the structural obstacles in the Palestinian arena is perhaps an even more daunting task today than it was when President Bush first enunciated the approach in 2002. This is precisely because five years have lapsed and so little has been done to change the core essence of PA politics. In this context, it is no surprise that the option of pursuing a final-status agreement -- a goal that eluded a president who invested his full energies in the effort, without the distraction of an unpopular war to contend with -- looks even more attractive.

But, rhetoric to the contrary, there is reason to believe that neither Israelis nor Palestinians are actually eager for what it takes to achieve rapid diplomatic movement. On the one hand, no Israeli government is likely to consider ceding critical assets to a Palestinian interlocutor so weak that it lost power in the one small piece of territory once under its total control. (Indeed, press reports suggest that Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert rebuffed Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's political horizon proposal during his visit to Washington last week.) On the other hand, no rump Palestinian government, still reeling from defeat, is likely to make concessions on the key issues -- such as refugees -- essential to any peace deal.

In the current environment, it would be no surprise if leaders on both sides agreed that now is not really the most propitious time to press for diplomatic progress, though they may want the illusion of diplomacy for local political purposes. Yet it is unclear why Washington would want to busy itself with an empty exercise that distracts from the important business of fixing the problems that produced the current situation.

An Alternative Horizon

If serious Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy is not in the cards at the moment, there is a different political horizon that diplomats could pursue: intra-Arab diplomacy. One positive by-product of the Hamas coup is that it brought an end, at least for now, to the calamitous Saudi-led diplomacy that produced the February 2007 Mecca accord's chimera of Palestinian unity. In its place is a resurgence of Egyptian- and Jordanian-led activism, reflected in yesterday's four-party summit in Sharm al-Sheikh. To be sure, Arab countries are split on the Palestinian issue, with Qatar, for example, helping to scuttle a UN Security Council statement in support of Abbas. But Egypt and Jordan are the actors with the most at stake and the most to invest in the Palestinian issue. The message of the Sharm al-Sheikh summit was more important than anything the UN can produce.

They could do much more, of course. Egypt, and especially Jordan, could transform the diplomatic environment if they were willing to respond to a request from Abbas to negotiate the framework of the long-term relationship between their countries and the eventual state of Palestine. Advocates of the diplomatic horizon approach believe that Palestinians need to see the detailed blueprint of a future Palestinian state to give them hope for the future, but even more important could be a clear definition of the neighborhood in which that state would operate.

In practice, this means that Abbas and Jordan's King Abdullah II could determine now the principles governing a confederation agreement, which both have indicated lies in store for Jordan and Palestine once a final-status deal is signed. Egypt, too, could negotiate with Abbas on the terms of an association agreement that would govern their relations. These accords, which would not come into force until later, would provide a calming political context for eventual Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and a strategic anchor for stability in a turbulent region. Unlike the calls for an Israeli-Palestinian political horizon, this Arab-Palestinian political

horizon is substantive, doable, and worthy of American diplomatic effort.

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