

Palestinian Alternatives and Strategies for the Coming Phase

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Introduction

Incertitude and confusion continue to envelop the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, which appear to be going on devoid of any content. Despite the stated American desire and pursuit to reach an agreement by the end of this year, and with talks about the proximity of reaching an agreement in the form of a declaration of principles, there is no real indication on the ground that the current talks will lead to an agreement. Israel continues to build and expand settlements, isolate Jerusalem, construct the Apartheid wall, and persist to carry out military operations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, while tightening the restrictions on the movement of citizens and goods, thus significantly undermining the ability of the Palestinian government to implement its reform and development programs at both the security and economic levels.

The consequences of the military action that brought Hamas into control in the Gaza Strip continue to amplify the internal crisis. Added to that is Hamas' insistence on establishing a military rule there, which will have a negative impact on the Palestinian internal dispute, especially after the failure of Arab efforts, most recently the Yemeni initiative, in advancing dialogue between Hamas and Fateh. Now, Egypt is concerting efforts to achieve a truce agreement between Hamas and Israel, while the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip continue to suffer under the Israeli hermetic siege.

The Palestinian Domestic Situation

Prior to considering ways of breaking the current impasse, it is important to recognize that the internal issue and the external political process are inexorably inseparable. Practically, the Palestinian internal order is a prerequisite to addressing the external political track on better terms. This way, the Palestinians will have a clear perception of how to resolve the current complexities to avoid division that may lead to undesired foreign intervention.

Currently, the Palestinian internal relations are going through a difficult era, and the Government's work is facing many challenges in light of Hamas' efforts to perpetuate the status quo, and the Israeli hermetic siege of the Gaza Strip, which is impeding the achievement of a stable economic life in Gaza. There is a general approach that believes that the internal situation cannot be finally and definitely resolved unless a public opinion is created to pressure achieving national census and reconciliation.

Since the Palestinian regional relations are going through a period of discomfort, there is an urgent need to break the stalemate at the Palestinian domestic level and stop waiting for external initiatives for reconciliation, by having the Palestinian Authority formulate an initiative to resolve the current impasse, in a way that it takes into consideration that Hamas will not substantially alter its political positions to become consistent with those of the Palestine Liberation Organization's, since the essence of the dispute is political. Therefore, any initiative for reconciliation should come up with a formula by which the Palestine Liberation Organization re-assumes its responsibility of guarding the national project and restoring legitimacy to the Gaza Strip and strive to form a government with political representation to reactivate the PLO, or a government of technocrats that prepares, upon national census, for Presidential and Legislative elections on the basis of proportional representation.

The Negotiations and Prospects of Solutions

The political process is facing great difficulties and is not moving at a pace or content that is consistent with the stated objectives according to official statements. The failure of the negotiations to meet their objectives will have grave consequences on the Palestinian side far more than both the American and the Israeli.

As such, the Palestinian public must be better informed of the flow of the negotiations process that will probably not reach any results during the period specified to the end of 2008. It would not be in the best interest of the Palestinians to reach a framework agreement or a declaration of principles that achieves less than international decisions. Negotiations that would continue according to the Israeli and American agendas shall not persist. But in the event that an agreement is reached, it is expected to clash with the divided situation and the status quo in Gaza Strip.

The Regional and International Atmosphere

It is important that the Palestinians strengthen their relations with the Arab neighbours, especially that the Arab countries that support the Palestinian position and are willing to act upon this support are limited. It is also important to seriously work to strengthen the international Quartet until the coming American administration realizes that the Quartet is determined to solve the crisis in the Middle East. This should come in conjunction with re-entering a partnership with

Russia and Europe, in consultation and coordination with the Arab countries, so as restore the humanitarian and Arab and Islamic dimension of the Palestinian cause. It is also important to make a legal move at the international level, through filing complaints against Israeli violations, and encourage convening an international conference within the framework of the international legitimacy to solve the Palestinian issue.

Options and Alternatives

1. ***Activating the role of the international Quartet:*** It is necessary that the Palestinians cooperate to strengthen the Quartet by developing a strategic partnership with Russia as a key player in the Quartet, in addition to the United States.
2. ***Truce:*** Within the existing circumstances, any efforts to achieve a truce with Israel are of Palestinian interest. It would give them time to re-arrange their international relations and reach national reconciliation.
3. ***Palestinian Entity:*** If the negotiations fail to deliver satisfying outcomes, any talk about a two-state solution will be unrealistic, especially if Israeli measures on the ground remain fait accompli. A final option will be to return to popular resistance.

Recommendations:

At the domestic level:

1. The Palestinian National Authority and the various factions of the PLO must come up with a dialogue initiative for reaching consensus to resolve the internal dispute. This should be a Palestinian priority prior to entering into any political peace process with the Israeli side.
2. Resort to early Presidential and Legislative elections on the basis of proportional representation, by census among the Palestinian factions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, so that these elections are inclusive of all factions and political parties and are conducted with transparency and integrity.
3. The Government must continue to provide services to citizens in the Gaza Strip as much as possible.
4. The PLO must be more engaged in guarding the national project through the formation of a government of politicians that works on national reconciliation.

On External Relations:

1. Avoid approving a declaration of principles agreement or a transitional agreement that achieves less than the Palestinian internationally recognized rights.
2. Work on replacing the bilateral negotiations with an international conference under the umbrella of the international legitimacy and the United Nations.
3. Inform the public of the flow of negotiations and its progress and milestones.
4. Resort to popular resistance with the support of the political leadership.
5. PLO factions and civil society organizations must develop a clear negotiations' strategy that would hold Israel accountable before the international community.

At the Regional and International levels:

1. Develop the Palestinian political and media discourse to restore the position of the Palestinian cause at the regional and international levels.
2. Activate the role of the international Quartet and open wider prospects of cooperation with Russia.
3. Regularly coordinate with the Arab countries to gain their support and strengthen regional relations.