

Fundamental Early Warning

From Civil War to Renewed Occupation

10.15.2006

Essence of Warning

Since the rise of Hamas to power (1/06), Israeli and US policy has been to put pressure on the government of the PA and to strengthen "moderate" Palestinian forces, especially Fatah, with the goal of overthrowing the Hamas government.

The Reut Institute contends that Israel's attempt to strengthen Fatah and overthrow Hamas is liable to cause a strategic political change leading to the increase of Israeli responsibility vis-à-vis the Palestinians and to the re-establishment of "occupation".

Introduction

1. Since Hamas' electoral victory (1/06), there has been a constant struggle between Fatah and Hamas for the leadership of the Palestinian national movement.
2. The failure to establish a national unity government and to end the economic boycott on the PA has led to the current escalation. The issue of recognizing Israel is the bone of contention between the sides.
3. In the backdrop of the struggle between the two movements¹, Palestinian Foreign Minister Mahmoud al-Zahar of Hamas warned that Abu Mazen's attempts at disbanding the Hamas government will lead to a civil war².

Israel's Policy: Overthrow Hamas Government

4. Since the rise of Hamas to power, Israel has been putting pressure on the PA government:
 - a. **Policy of Three Demands** – Israel has conditioned the removal of the economic boycott on the PA, upon Hamas' acceptance of three demands - recognition of Israel, re-affirmation of existing agreements, and cessation of violence (hereinafter, "three demands").
 - b. **Arrests and military action** – Israel has been arresting Hamas ministers and representatives in the Palestinian Legislative Council, in addition to putting military pressure on Hamas in the West Bank and Gaza.
5. This policy assumes that the "siege" on the PA will either put enough economic, political and popular pressure on Hamas to cause them to accept the three demands; *or* it will encourage "moderate" Palestinian forces to overthrow the Hamas government. However, Israel's policy has been unsuccessful for the following reasons:
 - a. **Hamas is not surrendering** – An explicit agreement by Hamas to accept the three demands contradicts their ideological principles and is therefore highly unlikely.
 - b. **No constitutionally viable way to overthrow Hamas** – **Since** Hamas holds the majority of PLC representatives, there is no constitutionally viable way for Fatah to

¹ Ynet, 10/4/06.

² Rubenstein, Ha'aretz, 10/4/06.

form a government without the support of Hamas. Even if Fatah wins the next elections, it will not be able to form a coalition without Hamas. (See: [No Palestinian Address Without Hamas](#))³.

6. In this context, and with the lack of a constitutional or politically viable way to overthrow Hamas, there are growing signs that Palestinian forces, and especially Fatah, are striving to overthrow the Hamas government by military means⁴.
7. Moreover, there are signs that Israel and the United States are strengthening Fatah and aiding them in preparation for a possible military clash with Hamas⁵.

Does This Policy Serve Israel's Interests?

8. Fatah's attempts to overthrow Hamas seem to serve Israel's interests. They confront the Hamas government, and may succeed in transforming the PA into a body that fights terrorism, and maybe even into a partner for the political process.
9. However, Israel's policy of strengthening Fatah may actually be a double-edged sword:
 - a. **There will not be a decisive Fatah victory** – Hamas' growing strength in the Gaza Strip, through weapons acquisition via the Egyptian border, will not enable Fatah to achieve a decisive military victory over Hamas. At most, there will be a military clash that may erupt into full-blown civil war.
 - b. **Danger of dismantling PA** – Currently, the PA is for the most part paralyzed. As a result, there are rising calls from the Palestinian public to dismantle the PA. A civil war is liable to be the final straw that causes this to happen.

³ For more on this issue: [Nathan Brown, "What Can Abu-Mazen Do?,"](#) Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

⁴ Fatah activists are escalating their activities against the Hamas government and are organizing "popular" strikes and rallies against them, blocking the crossing points to the Gaza Strip, and preparing for a military struggle against Hamas:

- a. Fatah set up training camps (Regular, **Ha'aretz**, 4/9/06) and is preparing for an all-out struggle against Hamas (Issacharoff, **Ha'aretz**, 6/18/06)
- b. Fatah initiated a military clash with Hamas (with reached its peak on 10/1/06) which led to the death of tens and the wounding of hundreds (**Reuters**, 10/2/06).
- c. Fatah targeted Islamic institutions in the West Bank (**PNN**, 10/3/06).
- d. Abu Mazen expanded his Presidential Guard by roughly 70% and established new training camps for them in Gaza and the West Bank. (**Reuters**, 10/4/06).

⁵ Media reports indicate that the escalation in the West Bank is accompanied by intervention by outside factors, especially the US, with the goal of strengthening Abu Mazen's and the Fatah's military capabilities.

- a. Israeli political and military sources report that the American government is secretly working to strengthen the military forces under Abu Mazen. (Benn, **Ha'aretz**, 5/16/06).
- b. The Government of Israel approved the transfer of arms and ammunition to the Palestinian Presidential Guard whose responsibility it is to protect Abu Mazen (Harel, **Ha'aretz**, 5/26/06).
- c. Olmert confirmed that he approved the transfer of arms and ammunition to Abu Mazen's Presidential Guard in the West Bank in order to "strengthen Abu Mazen against Hamas" (Benn, **Ha'aretz**, 6/14/06).
- d. During the summer, the US sent forces to train Abu Mazen's Presidential Guard. In addition, the Presidential Guard received arms shipments and aid from Europe, Egypt, and Jordan, during the past months (**Reuters**, 10/4/06).
- e. In the attempt to further strengthen Abu Mazen, the US is offering \$26 million in aid towards expanding the Presidential Guard from 3,500 to 6,000 soldiers (Erlanger, **New York Times**, 10/4/06).

- c. **Increased Israeli Responsibility?** – According to international law, the West Bank is considered under Israeli "occupation", and therefore Israel is legally responsible for providing basic services to the local population.

However, the services provided to the PA by the international community reduce, in practice, Israel's responsibility over the population in the West Bank and Gaza.

A civil war is liable to cause the international community to "flee" as well to weaken the effective control of the PA even to the point of its dismantling. This may re-establish Israel's responsibility over the population in the West Bank and Gaza.

10. Moreover, even if Fatah does prevail in the military struggle, it will unlikely lead to a breakthrough and may even cause further escalation:

- a. **Fatah is not an "address"** – The Fatah Movement is very divided and is in a deep internal crisis. Therefore, the Fatah does not serve as a real alternative to the Hamas government. Moreover, if Fatah rises to power through Israeli support, it will not have the legitimacy to act as a real "address" for Israel.
- b. **Hamas restrained versus unrestrained** – overthrowing Hamas will likely lead the movement to return to its old terrorist methods without the restraint that comes with governmental responsibility.

11. The conclusion of this document is that a policy whose goal is to strengthen Fatah and overthrow Hamas is liable to cause a strategic change in Israeli-Palestinian relations leading to the dismantling of the PA and the re-establishment of Israeli responsibility in Gaza and the West Bank.

End.