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PALESTINIAN STRATEGY AND THE PA-HAMAS UNDERSTANDING

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In a series of attacks on December 1-2, Palestinian suicide-bombers killed 45 Israelis and injured over 200. These attacks confronted Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasir Arafat with severe challenges. His response was to announce a cease-fire with Israel and to close down institutions of Hamas and Islamic Jihad. These actions were aimed at limiting the damage to his own position, but they do not appear to reflect a strategic shift in his policy *vis-à-vis* Israel or the Islamist organizations.

Since the attacks took place while United States special envoy General Anthony Zinni was in the region as part of an American effort to restore a cease fire, they seemed to be both a direct challenge to the US and a warning to Arafat not to succumb to American designs. They also exposed the hollowness of Arafat's pledges to reign in terrorism. Moreover, the Israeli Cabinet's subsequent determination that Arafat was no longer relevant – though problematic in its meaning and implications – raised the possibility that Israel might seek to topple him.

As on previous such occasions, Arafat called for a cease fire in the hope of mobilizing international pressure on Israel not to use force. But this time, Arafat was also subjected to heavy American pressure to act against the terrorist

infrastructure. The US endorsed the Israeli position that the end of violence was a precondition for diplomatic activity and it condoned Israel's right to employ a wide array of measures in self-defense.

Arafat was therefore confronted with the prospect that failure to act would result, not only in Israeli military pressure, but also in American condemnation of the PA as a terrorist-supporting entity, precisely when the US was itself waging a global campaign against terrorism. Inaction could also expose Arafat as a weak leader unable to control his own territories, further undermining what credibility he had left as a leader willing to pursue a political solution to the conflict and able to deliver on his part of any agreement. Nor was the risk confined to the US, where voices in the Administration and the media were openly describing him as a leader who had exhausted his historical role. Even in Europe, a growing distinction was being made between terrorism and other manifestations of the Palestinian struggle.

At the same time, Arafat understood that an all-out attempt to crush the Islamist organizations would be very costly politically and could escalate into a mini-civil war. Since he had always attached greater importance to national

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unity than to the requirements of American, not to speak of Israeli policy, he was unlikely to reverse his priorities now, especially given his waning popularity among his people.

Consequently, the PA security organs arrested some of those included in a list of terrorists presented to Arafat by Gen. Zinni, and they closed several Hamas offices. But the PA did not arrest the terrorists most active in planning and carrying out attacks, and on several occasions, Palestinian police turned back when crowds prevented them from making arrests. Nor did the PA shut down any of the bomb-producing facilities or collect weapons from Hamas fighters. Finally, Arafat refrained from giving his most efficient security organs a clear-cut order to crush the terrorist infrastructure.

In other words, Arafat resorted to his traditional tactic in the aftermath of large scale terrorist attacks: implementing partial measures in the hope of deflecting external pressure from himself and waiting for it to subside or for Israel to make a major blunder that would invite pressure on it.

But even half-hearted measures provoked popular opposition; an attempt to arrest Hamas leader Abd al-Aziz al-Rantisi led to violent clashes with Hamas supporters in Gaza and the death of six Palestinians. And Hamas and Islamic Jihad initially refused to stop their attacks on Israel. However, as Hamas had always feared being seen as responsible for internal Palestinian violence – a national Palestinian trauma since the 1936-39 rebellion and civil war -- the leadership located inside PA-controlled territory prevailed on the more hard-line leaders operating in exile to accept the need to reach an accommodation with the PA. Hamas was also pressured by friendly Arab leaders in the Persian Gulf to end the suicide attacks on civilians and was criticized in the Arab media for providing Israel with a pretext to destroy the PA.

Consequently, on December 21, the PA and

Hamas reached an unofficial understanding under which Hamas announced the suspension of suicide and mortar attacks inside Israel on condition that Israel cease its attacks on the Palestinian people. In return, the PA agreed to ease its clampdown on Hamas activists and institutions. But while Hamas appeared to be bowing to PA pressure, the wording of the agreement reflected a fundamental PA weakness. Statements such as “both parties will show restraint,” “armed elements [i.e. Hamas men] will not appear in the streets,” or “the police will not enter sensitive areas” seemed to put the PA and Hamas on an equal footing rather than to portray the PA as a legitimate government dealing with a political organization.

Still, the agreement proved that Arafat could accomplish a great deal if he were really determined to reduce if not eliminate violence and terrorism. More to the point, the Hamas announcement implied that attacks on Israeli settlers and soldiers in the West Bank and Gaza would continue as part of a legitimate struggle against occupation. The fact that the announcement was broadcast on the PA radio, no less than the glorification of a Fatah “martyr” killed while attacking a settler on December 25, indicates that Arafat condones this position. Since Israel is unlikely to accept this distinction between so-called legitimate resistance and terrorism, the end of violence is still a remote prospect.

In short, Arafat remains committed to a strategy devised in the 1980s that combines diplomatic and military measures in order to pressure Israel to accede to Palestinian demands. Although reliance on limited violence in the pursuit of Palestinian national goals has produced no tangible gains over the past year and has imposed a heavy human and economic burden on Palestinian society, there is still no evidence that events have convinced Arafat to abandon it.