

The Effects of Disengagement on Palestinian Politics and Society

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For several years Palestinian society has been grappling simultaneously with the impact of the intifada and with a process of leadership transformation. Both phenomena are profoundly disruptive and their courses remain highly uncertain. Since the Israeli disengagement will take place under the shadow of these two factors, its effect cannot be analytically isolated from them. Instead, the disengagement is almost symbiotically connected to them, making its ultimate impact on Palestinian society difficult to predict with any degree of confidence.

The Pre-Disengagement Socio-Political Environment *The Collapse of Public Order*

Whatever its effect on Israel, the intifada has had serious detrimental consequences for the Palestinians. The outbreak of the violence in September 2000 accelerated the pre-existing deterioration of public order in the West Bank and Gaza, to the point where the term most widely used to describe recent conditions is "intifawda" – a pun derived from the word *fawda* (chaos) and connoting "armed chaos." The progressive loss of the Palestinian Authority's ability to enforce its legal monopoly on the use of force is reflect-

ed in the emergence not just of armed militias guided by political agendas, but also of private groups and semi-political/semi-criminal gangs, of which some ten to fifteen are operating in various cities alongside (and sometimes in place of) PA security forces. The result is a pervasive sense of personal insecurity. The privatization of violence and the spread of lawlessness (*falatan*) are the most visible manifestations of the PA's failure to exercise authority, but the loss of control extends to other spheres as well, especially the internal management of the PA itself. Lacking clear lines of responsibility and accountability, the administration in PA-controlled areas has acquired an image of corruption (*fassad*) and mismanagement, leading to widespread public alienation.

In short, the intifada has culminated in a state of chronic disorder, both within the PA and on the streets of the West Bank and Gaza. This has given rise to persistent fears of *fitna* (civil strife). Indeed, there is already a kind of small-scale *fitna* in the independent initiatives of armed gangs, sometimes directed against Israel but often against the institutions and leading personalities of the PA, rival gangs, or private individuals – especially businessmen – whose vulnerability makes

them easy prey for intimidation and extortion in the name of "the cause." But while that form of fratricide already poisons the daily lives of many Palestinians, it also raises even more horrific fears of full-scale civil war involving the major political camps in Palestinian society: Fatah and the Islamists.

Transformation of Political Leadership

Systemic disorder has been accompanied by, and to some extent has accelerated, a parallel process of leadership transformation in all the major Palestinian political institutions. As a result, the PA, Fatah, the PLO, and Hamas all find themselves at something of a crossroads on the eve of disengagement. The PA, in urgent need of renovation after more than a decade under the leadership of Yasir Arafat, was scheduled to hold Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elections in July for the first time since 1996, but Chairman Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), lacking confidence in his own organizational base and concerned that Hamas might manage to reap electoral benefit from its claim of having forced Israel to withdraw, sought to postpone the parliamentary election as long as possible in the hope

that the salience of the disengagement would diminish in the minds of Palestinian voters. At this point, he has succeeded in deferring the election at least until January 2006.

One of his assumptions in pushing for the delay was almost certainly that he would, meanwhile, have managed to convene a Fatah Congress scheduled for August 2005 and to use that event to consolidate his authority over the movement. Since the death of Arafat, Abu Mazen has been unable to assert his control over Fatah and put his political house in order. Instead, he has been frustrated at almost every turn by the old guard of corrupt time-servers, challenged both from outside (by Farouq Qaddumi) and from inside (by Ahmad Qurei [Abu Ala'a]), and incapable of bringing to heel the nominally subordinate local militias operating under the rubric of the Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. Abu Mazen undoubtedly hoped that this Congress, the first in sixteen years, would sweep into positions of power a new generation of honest, locally-grounded supporters and produce an attractive list of candidates who would enhance Fatah's prospects of success in the PLC elections. But even this project was frustrated by the Central Committee, and the Fatah Congress was postponed until after the PLC elections. It is possible that Abu Mazen and his supporters agreed to this delay because they judged that the few months remaining until the parliamentary elections would not suffice to bring about a thorough reform of Fatah anyway, and they might achieve better results

by integrating some independent candidates into the Fatah list in order to endow it with greater credibility.

Nevertheless, Abu Mazen's hesitancy has exacerbated fears that the movement is completely incapable of promoting the agenda that it ostensibly upholds and for which Abu Mazen was ostensibly elected chairman. One expression of these fears was an "Open Letter" in late June in the PA's own newspaper, *al-Hayat al-Jadida*, by Nabil Amr, the same former minister and Fatah reformer whose denuncia-

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tions of Yasir Arafat's mismanagement had resulted in an attempt to assassinate him and who now criticized Abu Mazen for failing even to produce a workable reform plan, much less begin its implementation.

The ongoing crisis within Fatah has raised expectations that it will fail to withstand the growing challenge from Hamas, which has already registered significant gains in local elections and in public opinion polls. However, Hamas itself faces increased confusion about its political course. In part this is a function of the

expectation that the disengagement will exacerbate tensions between the local leadership and the leadership abroad, because the latter might take advantage of Israel's withdrawal to enter Gaza and compete directly for control of the movement. But it also arises from the ambivalence about Hamas' decision to contest the parliamentary elections. That implies recognition, however tacit and indirect, of the detested Oslo agreements, because the PLC is a creature of those agreements and participation in Oslo-inspired processes runs counter to the basic ethos of the movement. Moreover, while Hamas would surely like to make a respectable showing in the elections and perhaps secure several key social and economic ministries that could be used to buttress its popular base further, it is much less certain about the desirability of an outright majority and of inadvertently gaining control of the entire PA. That would force it to accept overall responsibility for the fate of the Palestinians, including the need to engage in some sort of non-violent interaction with Israel.

That possibility emerges from the fact that Islamist resurgence means a transformation, not only in the PA, but also in the PLO – the ultimate source of authority for all Palestinian relations with the rest of the world, including Israel. For much of the past decade, Hamas has carried out on-again, off-again negotiations with Fatah about its potential incorporation into the PLO. These negotiations always foundered on Fatah's rejection of Hamas demands for 40 percent rep-

resentation in PLO institutions based on the untested claim that Hamas had the support of 40 percent of the people. But such demands will be more difficult if not impossible to resist if Hamas registers close to that degree of success, or better, in the elections. In that case, Hamas will carry significant weight within the PLO by right, rather than by Fatah generosity, perhaps to the point of bringing about a fundamental transformation of the organization into what some Hamas spokesmen already call "PLO-III" (with barely disguised contempt for both the PLO-I of Ahmad Shukeiri and the PLO-II of Yasir Arafat). Because of the religious absolutism central to the Hamas worldview, such a transformation would diminish the chances, already rather remote, of any productive permanent status negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

Apart from Fatah and the Islamists, most of the other pre-intifada components of political society have faded into insignificance. The left, represented by Mustapha Barghouti in the presidential elections, is a marginal force, and its organizational manifestations, including Fida (largely consisting of remnants of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine), the communists, and even the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, are little more than shadows of their former selves. And while they have attempted to use opposition to the security fence/wall as a lever for mobilization of non-violent activity, there is nothing to suggest that their pros-

pects for revitalization are promising. As for the Palestinian "peace camp," it is in a state of what can charitably be described as suspended animation.

Social Fragmentation

Beyond its direct political impact, the intifada has had some noteworthy consequences for Palestinian society. Israeli countermeasures, including the disruption of free movement between different regions, have contributed to the relocalization of social frameworks. But social fragmentation has been psychological as well as geographical. Because of the breakdown of public order and the dysfunction of public institutions, there has been a reversion to reliance on traditional clan networks for protection and welfare support. In the face of these trends, few national networks have emerged. The major exception has been the prisoners' movement, which has become more prominent because of the increase in the number of prisoners in Israeli jails (about 9000) and because the prison population includes senior politicians, religious leaders, and other members of the Palestinian elite. These prisoners are seen to embody the national struggle and symbolize Palestinian suffering, and their movement has acquired a rare moral authority.

The Consequences of Disengagement

Although few Palestinians would go so far as to oppose Israel's withdrawal from Gaza and the northern West Bank, many view it with grave mis-

givings, suspecting that it may turn out to be a "poisoned chalice." Their concerns relate to post-disengagement Israeli-Palestinian dynamics, domestic politics, and economics.

Israeli-Palestinian Dynamics

Palestinian efforts to guarantee Israeli commitment to an ongoing process of withdrawal and/or permanent status negotiations after the disengagement have been singularly unsuccessful. Notwithstanding similar urgings by various international parties and lip-service to the roadmap, Israel has refused to undertake such a commitment, not just because that is ideologically distasteful to powerful elements in the government, but also because Israeli politics are likely to be paralyzed after September 2005 by coalition crises and the possibility that the country will enter a pre-election phase. Therefore, the Israeli government is apparently planning to buy time and create a sense of motion without movement by instituting some confidence-building measures (CBMs). Measures under consideration include the opening of a seaport and airport in Gaza, expansion of the maritime operating space available to Gaza fishermen, the release of substantial numbers of "high quality" prisoners, authorization of voting rights for those prisoners remaining in jail, institution of some arrangement for "safe passage" (or "semi-safe passage" between Gaza and the West Bank), and support for efforts to re-equip Palestinian security forces and mobilize financial assistance to Gaza.

Although such measures might produce a sense of hope among Palestinians sufficient to compensate for the likely absence of any serious progress in political negotiations, even they will be problematic for Israel, because they will be difficult to initiate in what may be an atmosphere of post-disengagement trauma and almost impossible to sustain except in the highly improbable situation of a complete absence of terrorist acts emanating from either Gaza or the West Bank. Besides, the two sides will be pursuing contradictory aims in any experiment in confidence-building: in advance of Israeli elections, the Israeli government will want to mark time and make minimal unrequited concessions; in advance of Palestinian elections, the PA will want to maximize concrete gains while minimizing any reciprocity in order to demonstrate the superiority of coordination with Israel over the preferred Hamas approach of outright confrontation. Since the only ostensibly common aim of the two sides is to lay the groundwork to blame the other if/when the situation deteriorates, there is little prospect of any real breakthrough in the immediate aftermath of the disengagement, not only with respect to negotiations but even with respect to the stabilization implied by the institution of CBMs.

Domestic Politics

A second source of apprehension concerns the ability of the PA to assume control of Gaza and perform as an effective, responsible government. This

stems from the belief that Gaza will be seen both by Palestinians and foreigners (especially the US administration) as a test case, and that the PA will fail the test. Indeed, considerable effort is already being invested in preparing the alibi for anticipated failure by developing the argument that disengagement will not really be the end of Israeli occupation. The most specific focus of concern is the disposition of the real estate Israel will evacuate in Gaza. This state land, which comprises about 18 percent of the territory, is worth millions and has already provoked some instances of squatting. The PA would like to gain direct control of the land and any other physical assets Israel leaves behind, if only because they could become a precious electoral asset. It therefore would prefer a quiet, orderly transfer and has already announced the establishment of a special 5000-man force under the command of Interior Minister Nasir Yousef to ensure that outcome. But by most accounts, all Palestinian security forces remain in a state of serious disarray, and there are doubts about the PA's ability to prevent an unregulated land rush.

Economics

Third, the disengagement may well have an adverse impact on Palestinian economics. The most immediate consequence will be the loss of jobs in the Katif bloc within the Gaza Strip itself for about 5000 Palestinian workers. The direct job losses may also extend to the industrial parks along the Gaza-Israel border, including the

one at Erez that once employed 3000 workers and still provides jobs for about 300. Moreover, the disengagement is part of a broader process that involves the erection of the separation barrier in or around the West Bank. When that barrier is completed sometime in 2006, it will eliminate the gray/black economy that persists because of what remains of access by West Bank Palestinians to Israel. All this suggests that the immediate economic impact of disengagement/separation is likely to be negative.

Of course, the completion of the barrier will also probably result in the easing of current restrictions on movement within the West Bank, which would have a positive economic impact. Moreover, the G-8 has recently announced its support of the initiative by Quartet representative James Wolfensohn to mobilize a global contribution of up to \$3 billion per year over the coming three years to help in the reconstruction of Gaza. But unless the PA designs a comprehensive economic plan to deal with the possible rupture of all ties between Palestinians and Israelis and, more urgently, acts decisively to end the *fawda* and establish conditions of stability, public order, and transparency, even that sum will have no more durable structural impact than did the billions in aid given to the PA before 2000.

Political-Security Implications

Extrapolation from current trends suggests that the disengagement does not augur well for the Fatah-controlled PA. Barring unanticipated

developments, its inability to govern effectively or to produce any short-term tangible benefits for Palestinians will reflect badly on its reputation and on its political viability. That, in turn, may work to the short-term advantage of Hamas, an advantage that could translate into electoral gains if the elections are held soon after the disengagement, before the immediate psychological gratification of Israeli withdrawal gives way to disaffection that might also be directed against it.

In such circumstances, there is little reason to expect that tranquility will prevail for very long. Technically, the *tahdia* (informal agreement to maintain calm) is scheduled to expire at the end of 2005, and whatever interest the general public may have in prolonging it, the decision ultimately rests in the hands of Hamas, which might revert to violence in order to salvage its political standing following a failed experiment of participation in government; of other groups like Islamic Jihad and the PFLP; or even of uncontrollable individuals.

Whether or not Gaza will become a hotbed of intensified terror after the disengagement is a matter of speculation, and opinions are divided. But most indicators suggest – and most analysts agree – that while the terrorists' major center of gravity will shift to the West Bank and their focus will be on the settlements and the access roads (if not also on targets inside the Green Line), Gaza will at least serve as a training area and as the terrorists' rear echelon and support base for weapons smuggling and local

production; and will offer safe harbor for wanted terrorists and senior commanders. It may also provide Hamas with a favorable environment in which to build a larger militia, since the organization will enjoy a considerable degree of immunity, at least at first, as a result of international pressure on Israel to allow the PA time to organize itself and stabilize the situation in the area.

Conclusion

As a factor impacting on Palestinian politics and society, Israeli disengagement poses both risks/costs and potential opportunities/benefits. In the context of broader underlying processes, however, the former generally appear to outweigh the latter, because the disengagement contributes little to the ending of public insecurity and chaos, social fragmentation, or economic deterioration. And though the sight of unilateral Israeli withdrawal will almost certainly provide some short-term psychological gratification, that will hardly provide for a fundamental change in underlying conditions or a resolution of the current dilemmas, some of which may actually be exacerbated. Without structural change and tangible benefits for ordinary citizens, the Gaza disengagement alone will therefore do little in the medium and longer term to change the balance of forces in Palestinian society. At best, it will allow for prolongation of the economic and social status quo; at worse, it may even lead to further deterioration.

To the extent that such developments are perceived by Israel to be detrimental to its own interests, it may decide to implement a number of complementary measures in order to ameliorate the negative consequences of disengagement and enhance Abu Mazen's ability to consolidate his rule. Such measures, some of which were already agreed to and/or initiated in the past, could include:

1. accelerating projects to create the "safe passage" between Gaza and the West Bank
2. permitting rehabilitation of the airport in Gaza
3. avoiding large-scale destruction of existing facilities and infrastructure in Gaza and transferring them intact to the PA
4. facilitating efforts by international factors to promote job-creation projects in Gaza
5. releasing Palestinian prisoners to the maximum extent consistent with concrete security concerns
6. showing the maximum degree of consideration possible for Palestinian humanitarian needs in the operation of security-barrier crossing points

To the extent that the post-disengagement political capacity of Israel's own government permits such measures (which is by no means certain), their adoption could mitigate the negative consequences of disengagement for the Palestinians and perhaps even stimulate structural changes that could work to the benefit of both Palestinians and Israelis.