

HAARETZ.com

Published 11.02.11

## The uprising that wasn't

*Under circumstances of prolonged impasse, one local violent event that spins out of control would put Israel and the Palestinians on a collision course.*

By Anat Kurz

The political and media tempest generated in the Palestinian arena by Al Jazeera's disclosure of documents pertaining to Israeli-Palestinian peace talks abated very quickly. Publication of the documents by the Qatar-based network, which has connections with Hamas, was designed to stimulate public protest against the Palestinian Authority and undermine its status. The PA, however, survived the crisis - not only

because the topic of the documents was displaced from the public agenda by the turmoil in Egypt. Even without the attention-grabbing events in Egypt, it is doubtful that the disclosure of the documents would have achieved its objectives.

Al Jazeera, whose broadcasts fanned the popular protests that erupted in Tunisia and Egypt, failed in its effort to ignite disturbances against the PA in the West Bank. This failure bore witness to the limits of efforts to stir revolts in places where the public has no interest in them. External provocation alone does not send the masses to the streets; popular protest is predicated upon authentic desire for change. And in the West Bank, popular motivation is moving in the exact opposite direction: There is a desire to regulate the process of institution-building that is currently under way under the leadership of Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, with the support of President Mahmoud Abbas.

The peace process impasse has not frozen this institution-building process, a process that began at a time when negotiations between Israel and the PA were still on track. The security situation in the West Bank has stabilized; the economy shows signs of growth; and national institutions are slowly gaining the public's trust. To be sure, the PA is subject to criticism at home, especially due to the cooperation of its security forces with the Israel Defense Forces, particularly in the continuing effort to stifle Hamas' attempts to drag Israel and West Bank residents into renewed violent conflict - and that without political progress toward the establishment of a Palestinian state.

Nonetheless, in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, support for the PA exceeds that for Hamas. These circumstances furnish at least a partial explanation of why West Bank residents recoil from rising up against the PA, in protests that could turn into a conflict with Israel and overturn gains earned by reforms in security, economic and other spheres.

It could be claimed that support for the PA reflects sympathy for its current position regarding the resumption of peace talks with Israel. The PA's demands for recognition of East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine, and for a complete freeze on settlement activity, in addition to its categorical refusal to recognize Israel as a Jewish state, are popular with the Palestinian public. However, the PA also enjoyed support when the Annapolis dialogue was in full swing; this support implies an understanding that the vision of a Palestinian state cannot be realized in the absence of political-territorial concessions. For this reason, disclosure of secret peace discussions, even regarding sensitive final status issues, did not come as a complete shock or surprise. This lack of surprise, along with a fear of a general deterioration of events in the West Bank, explains why there was no uprising there when Al Jazeera disclosed the documents.

Moreover, the diplomatic offensive conducted by the PA inspires hope among residents of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, even if the vision is consigned to a distant future. The current trend of in-principle recognition of a Palestinian state, which has swept through countries in South America, will be long in crossing the Atlantic Ocean to reach Europe - if the trend makes such a crossing at all. Like the U.S. government, the European Union is committed to negotiations between Israel and the PA as the means of establishing a Palestinian state. In the meantime, Palestinians would like to see the international support that is consolidating for a state translate into increased pressure on Israel. This hope will be shattered should residents of the West Bank lose their patience and rise up against the PA. Diplomatic momentum would be lost in any event, whether an uprising would produce anarchy or bring Hamas to power in the West Bank.

Does the relative quiet that now grips the West Bank exempt the PA and Israel from a need to revive the peace process, in an attempt to forge an agreement? Definitely not. The atmosphere there reflects aspirations for a better future. In contrast, a continued stalemate in the peace process would be likely to pollute this atmosphere, and bring the West Bank to the boiling point. Under such circumstances of

prolonged impasse, one local violent event that spins out of control would be enough to throw Israel and the Palestinians back on a collision course - in fact, under such circumstances, incendiary broadcasts by Al Jazeera would not be needed to ignite an uprising in the West Bank. When it comes to uprisings, the history of the Palestinian people is laced with its own distinctive sources of inspiration.

Dr. Anat Kurz is director of research at the Institute for National Security Studies, Tel Aviv University.

<http://www.haaretz.com/misc/article-print-page/the-uprising-that-wasn-t-l.342649?trailingPath=2.169%2C2.225%2C2.227%2C>