



BRIEFING PAPER ON THE PALESTINIANS: GAZA AND LEBANON

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The Civil War in Gaza represents the culmination of more than seventy years of Palestinian political culture. Washington should be under no illusions about Mahmoud Abbas' ability to prosecute this war or that his victory will revive the peace process. Furthermore, an equally important round of Palestinian fighting is taking place in northern Lebanon where the Lebanese army is battling Fatah al-Islam. This fight takes place as Sunni support inside Lebanon and throughout the region for Fouad Siniora's government marks a major shift in Sunni regional strategy. Building on that new found support, Mubarak must close down the smuggling routes into Gaza and interdict Hamas' weapon flow. The following is a briefing on the Palestinian situation in Gaza and Lebanon, prepared by Lee Smith, Visiting Fellow with Hudson Institute.

I. Gaza

The Palestinian civil war in Gaza has been understood as yet another setback for the Bush White House and yet another sign of an ascendant Iran. But all is not what it seems in the Middle East where chaos in Gaza is perhaps less dramatic than it appears and the Lebanese army's battle in Tripoli is an overlooked achievement for Washington and its regional allies.

Gaza is merely the continuation of a Palestinian civil war that began more than 70 years ago with Hajj Amin al-Husseini's Arab Revolt. He assassinated rivals while establishing the basis of Palestinian political culture – extremism is rewarded and moderation is futile if not suicidal.

Yasser Arafat is the father of Palestinian nationalism precisely because he was able to quell the Palestinian civil war while taking the Palestinian file away from other regional players, namely Egypt and Syria. Arafat established his own power and consolidated competing clans and centers of power into one entity through one simple tactic – waging war against Israel, a common enemy that all Palestinians could safely agree to fight.

But all that time the Palestinian civil war was still raging. Consider the late 80s and 90s, including the Oslo years, when Hamas first started to make a name for itself. The Palestinians were not fighting each other directly but through attacks on Israel. That is, Palestinian factions were fighting for prestige and shares of power, often allocated by Arafat himself, by killing Jews. Those factions that staged the most spectacular attacks won more respect, a larger constituency, more external support from the Gulf states, Iraq or Iran and hence more power.

These attacks constituted a political campaign, one that effectively decided the 2006 elections for Hamas. Yes, the Palestinians voted *against* Fatah corruption, but they did not vote *for* good governance - or, in President Bush's formula, "fixing streetlights." In the world Arafat wrought, corruption is to deal with Israel in earnest at all, never mind giving away any part of Palestine, or any Palestinian rights, like the right to resistance (terrorism) and the right to return (undermine the Jewish state). Good governance means waging the war that Arafat promised – and winning it. A vote for Hamas was a vote for the political institution most likely to prosecute a successful war against Israel. Except for Islamist domestic policies, Hamas champions exactly the same causes as Fatah, just more intransigently.

The US is allied with Mahmoud Abbas but should be under no illusions as to his political orientation or, more importantly, his ability to win this civil war. Note Abbas's choice for new PA Prime Minister, Salam Fayyad, former PA Finance Minister. It is still not clear why Muhammad Dahlan, the Fatah official most capable of winning such a war, is in Cairo for medical treatment. The point is that Abbas is not interested in winning this fight; rather he is resolved to ensure the steady flow of money into his and other Fatah bank accounts.

If with enough American support Abbas does win, there are absolutely no circumstances under which he is capable of playing an effective role in the peace process. As if we need to be reminded once again, the peace process is, at least for the foreseeable future, finished. It is a waste of time, money, lives and prestige to continue beating this dead horse.

However, Gaza is not the only Palestinian battlefield in the region right now and so it should be put in its regional context. If the fighting in Gaza is about something old, developments in Lebanon are pointing to something very new indeed.

II. Lebanon

Last Sunday, rockets were fired from southern Lebanon into Israel. We may never know exactly who is responsible, but we can be pretty sure why it happened.

Close to Tripoli, in the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp, the Lebanese army seems to be on the verge of putting down Fatah al-Islam, an armed Palestinian faction with ties to Damascus, and led by a man, Shaker al-Absi, described in the Arab press as a Syrian intelligence asset. The Assad regime is using Fatah al-Islam to destabilize the government of Fouad Siniora, a US ally. With defeat on the horizon, the Syrians are likely looking to open up another front to attack the Lebanese government.

However, the key factor in the equation is the Palestinians.

Back in the 70s, Lebanon's Maronite community wanted to put down the PLO and other

Palestinian factions that sought to turn Lebanon into a garrison state. However, the Christians were blocked by the Sunnis, both within Lebanon and in the region. Today the situation is reversed as Fouad Siniora has the support of the Gulf States and other Sunni powers, like Egypt and Jordan, to take on an armed Palestinian group manipulated by the Alawi regime in Damascus.

At the same time, with Arafat gone, foreign actors are once again trying to use the Palestinian file to their own advantage – namely, Hamas in Gaza and Fatah al-Islam in Lebanon. And the two powers at work here, Iran and Syria are fighting the Sunni order, an untenable situation, not only to the Sunni states, but also Washington.

Sunni support for putting down an armed Palestinian insurgency in Lebanon represents a significant shift in regional strategy. It is also a sharp reminder that only the Sunnis have the legitimacy to take large decisions in the Arab Middle East. As the Sunnis lined up behind Israel in last summer's war against Hezbollah, today they are lined up behind Siniora in taking on a Syrian-backed Palestinian jihadi group.

III. Gaza and Egypt

This in turn brings us back to Gaza. As with other Sunni powers, Egypt's Hosni Mubarak has publicly expressed his concern over Iranian (and Shia) influence in the Middle East. Now with Iran on his border, it is time for the Egyptian president to deal actively with the Hamas threat.

In the past, Egypt's military and security apparatus has looked the other way as thousands of weapons are smuggled annually through Rafah into the Gaza strip. Presumably, Mubarak believes it is better to give Hamas some room than aggravate his own Muslim Brotherhood, but this strategy is no longer plausible with two allies, Israel and Fatah, under siege, and Egypt itself in a dangerous situation. After all, Anwar Sadat's assassination was a by-product of the revolutionary energies Iran's 1979 Islamic takeover loosened throughout the region.

With the same Sunni support that Siniora has been able to muster, Mubarak must at the very least interdict the flow of weapons into Gaza to choke Hamas. The Saudis will have to forget their failed Mecca accord, and the White House can prick Cairo's conscience with every bit of leverage it has, including the annual \$2 billion dollar aid package. From Egypt's perspective, that money is the lifeblood of the regime that keeps retired military and mukhabarat officers happy; from Washington's, it is meant to stake US interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. And with Iran and its ally in Damascus moving on several fronts at once, it is time for the White House to call in its marker.

Washington must recognize that in Gaza some things have not changed at all and will not for the foreseeable future; and that in Lebanon things are changing very quickly. American officials must work to galvanize its Sunni allies, from Cairo to Beirut and Riyadh, and coordinate and prioritize. What the Lebanese army's war against Fatah al-Islam represents is more important than the Palestinian civil war in Gaza.