

# Rejectionists Ready to Counter U.S. Peace Push

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## Brief Analysis

**W**ith rumors in the air of a U.S.-brokered, mid-September meeting between Israeli and Palestinian leaders, various regional actors are busy positioning themselves for the coming round of diplomacy. Analysis of these dynamics provides some useful perspective on the road ahead, beyond the usual focus on the minutiae of settlement construction, prisoner exchanges, or other immediate concerns. Especially noteworthy in this context are the latest maneuvers by members of the rejectionist or "resistance" axis: Iran, Syria, Hizballah, and Hamas. Their positions have hardened even further as the United States, Israel, the Palestinian Authority (PA), and Egypt keep talking about peace talks. This drawing of lines at least has the virtue of clarifying the real possibilities -- and the real partners -- for any regional peacemaking efforts.

Iran: "Annihilation of the Zionist Regime Is within Reach"

Tehran, preoccupied as it may be with internal troubles, has not lost sight of its opposition to Israel's existence and to what it derisively labels the U.S. "agent" Arab "conciliation camp," supposedly led by Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. On August 25, for instance, Majlis Speaker Ali Larijani, sometimes termed a relative moderate, or pragmatist, asserted that President Obama's concept of peace "does not address even one of the Palestinians' basic rights." Since late June, Tehran's two main hardline dailies -- almost the only ones still allowed to publish there -- have amplified this theme on at least three separate occasions. Kayhan editorialized that "the establishment of two states, Palestinian and Zionist, would be the same as totally crushing the rights of the Palestinian people." Rather, the paper declared, "a solution can only be achieved by completely eradicating the Zionist regime." Similarly, Jomhuri-ye Islami warned that the "Palestinians must not be satisfied with anything less than the annihilation of the Zionist regime -- a goal that is within reach."

Iran also used the platform of Syrian president Bashar al-Asad's August 19 official visit to reaffirm its support for the "resistance camp." Such rhetoric may indicate some anxiety in Iran about potential progress in Arab-Israeli peacemaking, but also clearly demonstrates that Iran itself has abandoned any hope of professing moderation on this issue -- either to evade sanctions or buy time for its nuclear program. Instead, Iran has concentrated, with some success, on enlisting Third World diplomatic support for a new convention that bans attacks against any nuclear facilities. On a more practical level, Tehran reportedly continues to ship medium-range missiles and other weapons to both Hamas and Hizballah. For the time being, the main effect of these Iranian policies has not been to intimidate

the Arab "conciliation camp," but rather to reinforce the determination of Iran's existing Arab friends -- Syria, Hamas, and Hizballah -- not to join that camp.

#### Syria: Questioning the Basis for any Peace Talks

President al-Asad's August 30 meeting with European Union representative Javier Solana was notable, judging by official Syrian reports, for going beyond Syria's previous refusal to countenance direct peace talks with Israel and for venturing further to undermine the idea of Palestinian-Israeli negotiations as well. "We want to raise questions," Foreign Minister Walid Mouallem told the Syrian Arab News Agency after the Solana meeting, "amid the mounting talk about meetings between Palestinians and Israelis: What happened concerning the halt of settlements ... and stopping judaizing [sic] Jerusalem and demolishing houses? And what happened concerning lifting the siege imposed on the people of Gaza ...?"

In other words, rather than encouraging Hamas to accept peace talks with Israel, as some American analysts had once hoped, Damascus is now trying to discourage even the PA from resuming these negotiations. This stance fits well with other recent Syrian moves: reaffirming its fealty to Iran and to Hizballah, and refusing to accept responsibility for terrorists crossing its border with Iraq. Such a posture may not spell the end of American attempts to engage Damascus, but it does suggest the impracticality of trying to entice Syria into an Arab-Israeli peace process any time soon.

#### Hizballah: Business as Usual

Since a brief flurry of missile-rattling rhetoric ("We can reach Tel Aviv") earlier this summer, Hizballah spokesmen and media have not had much to say about Israel or the peace process. Hizballah has also refrained from provocations on the Lebanese-Israeli border, even as occasional explosions, UN reports, and scuffles with local residents demonstrate that it continues to rearm and prepare for another round of warfare. At the same time, Israeli press reports on August 31 strongly suggest that Hizballah is still seeking -- so far in vain -- to mount a dramatic, high-profile assassination to avenge the death of terrorist mastermind Imad Mughniyah in a car bombing in Syria early last year.

But right now, Hizballah's main efforts seem to focus on maintaining its power inside Lebanon -- Prime Minister Saad Hariri is still struggling to form a new cabinet -- despite Hizballah's own electoral losses in June. In this connection, Hariri's recent pronouncement that Hizballah will be part of his new government "whether Israel likes it or not" offers some sense of the influence this radical movement continues to exert on every aspect of Lebanese affairs.

#### Hamas: Taking Itself Out of the Equation

Most significant of all these recent reactions is that of Hamas. After months of scattering verbal hints of possible concessions, Hamas has now clearly opted out of diplomacy. Symptomatic was the August 30 speech by its political leader, Khaled Meshal, briefly allowed back into Jordan -- after ten years of enforced exile in Syria -- to attend the funeral of his father. Meshal, once viewed in some quarters as comparatively pragmatic, placed primary emphasis on the "right of return," a guaranteed diplomatic dead end. He presented this as a kind of Palestinian gesture to the interests of Jordan, home to some four million citizens of Palestinian origin or ancestry -- but one that represents the antithesis of peace for Israel. On the same day, as if to rub salt in the wound, the Hamas Popular Committee for Refugees wrote in opposition to a rumored plan to mention the Holocaust in a new UNRWA history curriculum: "We refuse to let our children study a lie invented by the Zionists." Moreover, Hamas officials have practically ceased talking about terms for Palestinian unity or reconciliation with their Fatah rivals. Those few Fatah leaders still alive and not under arrest in Gaza were not even allowed out to attend the recent, long-awaited all-Fatah Congress in the West Bank.

This Hamas attitude is especially noteworthy because -- as Meshal and other leaders must be aware -- the movement's condition is currently quite weak. Ever since last January's very damaging war with Israel, Hamas has dared to fire very few rockets or mortars across the border. A few senior members of the movement, like Ghazi Hamad, have even admitted recently in public that Hamas should "not want emotions and pompous slogans to push aside and take the place of facts." Credible Palestinian public opinion polls show Hamas steadily losing ground, to the point that barely a quarter of the public supports it any longer -- and elections are scheduled just four months from now.

The paradox, however, is that Hamas, far from seeking a peaceful way out, seems to be hunkering down. If it agrees to Palestinian unity, it could lose its hold on Gaza. If it agrees to peace with Israel, it could lose its very identity. And Hamas is determined to hold on to those possessions at any cost.

The Moderates on the Line: Implications for U.S. Policy

Can the Arab moderates simply reject this rejectionist challenge and proceed with the peace process? The answer, to paraphrase President Obama, is "Yes, they can" -- if Washington encourages rather than undercuts them. Some observers have noted that in apparent response to U.S. policy shifts, Palestinian and Egyptian officials have taken to insisting on an Israeli settlement freeze as a new precondition for peace negotiations. Few observers, however, have noted that previous prerequisites for such negotiations -- such as "Palestinian unity" or lifting the "siege" of Gaza -- have virtually vanished from the Egyptian or Palestinian lexicon. The PA, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and even Qatar have just about given up on the chimera of Palestinian unity on any terms that might be acceptable to Hamas, at least for a while. President Mubarak, after his White House meeting in early August, softened his earlier position that new Arab overtures to Israel must await a comprehensive peace agreement, in favor of the view that that other Arabs would "support" peace talks as soon as they commenced. In concrete terms, this could mean that most Arab states would increase their support for the PA and decrease their support for Hamas. That alone would have more meaning than all the landing rights, quasi-diplomatic offices, or other symbolic gestures that any Arab government might offer Israel directly at this stage.

For U.S. policy in the Arab-Israeli arena, the implications are clear: To bring these Arab moderates willingly to the peace table, find a reasonable resolution of the Israeli settlement dispute as soon as possible. Give priority to the Palestinians over the Syrians or Lebanese in the peace process. Keep containing, rather than trying to engage, Hamas or Hizballah, and concentrate on further improving conditions in the West Bank. Today, for a change, it is the peacemakers who are on the rise and the warmongers who are actually on the defensive. The key to keeping it that way is to recognize the rejectionists for what they are and to leave them by the wayside.

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