

Security First

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Articles & Testimony

When the dust settles in Gaza, the Obama administration will take up the mantle of moving the two sides toward an Israeli-Palestinian peace. American efforts must focus on strengthening the capabilities of the Palestinian party upon whom hope for peace can rest, the Palestinian Authority, and ensuring the stability of the West Bank.

Even before the breakdown of the Gaza cease-fire last month, Israelis and Palestinians were exhausted, bitter, and skeptical that a genuine partner for peace existed. The trust that the Oslo process intended to build collapsed with the second intifada, the wave of suicide bombings in Israel, the Israeli military's reoccupation of much of the West Bank and ongoing settlement construction. A major diplomatic initiative pressuring the parties to make concessions -- or imposing the terms of an agreement -- clearly will not work. Events in Gaza underscore the fact that progress toward peace will not occur without confidence that an agreement will produce lasting security. Unless it commands effective and loyal security forces, no Palestinian government -- however well intentioned -- will be able to uphold its part of an agreement.

Fortunately, there is a path forward. American efforts can forge a basis for security between Israelis and Palestinians by developing a professional Palestinian security system that would help inhibit Hamas in the West Bank and eventually allow the PA to reestablish its authority in Gaza.

The United States already has a framework for supporting this process through the Office of the U.S. Security Coordinator (USSC), headed by Lt. Gen. Keith Dayton. Despite limited funding and support from Washington, Dayton's mission has made considerable progress over the past year. It has overseen the training of more than 1,000 members of the Presidential Guard and the National Security Force -- an armed national police. These units deployed to Jenin, and more recently to Hebron, where they began enforcing order in previously lawless cities. All sides acknowledge the achievements of this effort, yet fundamental security will emerge only when Palestinian security forces target terrorist cells and networks, not just car thieves and other ordinary criminals. And despite some recent progress, counterterrorism efforts by the Dayton-led units remain extremely limited.

To develop a professional Palestinian security force capable of conducting counterterrorism operations, Washington must substantially expand and reorient Dayton's effort as part of the broader institutional reform of the Palestinian Authority. The mission must have a regular budget and an augmented, qualified staff (only 16 Americans are assigned to the USSC, including just two speakers of Arabic). American forces must be given legal permission to directly supervise training and operations of foreign police. Authority for the mission should be transferred from the State Department to the Defense Department, allowing the military to allocate its own equipment, specialized funds and intelligence assets to the effort. Such a change would also improve the teams' freedom of movement, as they currently must get permission and security protection from the American consulate in Jerusalem when traveling in the West Bank.

An effective security force would not by itself guarantee that Palestinians have the will to act against terrorism. Nor would it solve the intra-Palestinian conflict between Hamas and its secular, nationalist rival, Fatah. But providing the

PA with a professional and properly equipped security force -- supported by Israelis and Palestinians -- is a necessary condition for delivering security and an institutional requirement for statehood.

Some argue that NATO should replace the Israeli Defense Forces in the West Bank and substitute for Palestinian security forces. There may be a role for international forces to monitor an eventual peace agreement, or even a possible border arrangement in Gaza as part of a cease-fire, but it would be impractical to make the international community responsible for delivering Israeli-Palestinian security before peace is achieved. For one thing, the Israelis would be unwilling to outsource their security to other nations, and Palestinians would be reluctant to accept what would amount to another, at least temporary, foreign occupation.

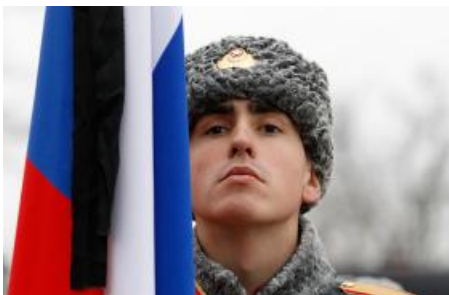
In addition, NATO members and other potential participants in such a force would struggle to provide qualified combat, intelligence and civil affairs specialists for the mission. Many NATO militaries have never performed counterterrorism operations and have eschewed doing so in Afghanistan. Those nations that have sent forces to Afghanistan do not have much additional capability to contribute to another effort. Peacekeeping forces would face sophisticated attacks by Hamas and groups such as Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad; in such an environment, a NATO force would need the capability and the will to proactively move to prevent terrorist operations, using deadly force when necessary. America's European partners would be extremely reluctant to participate in such operations without caveats, leaving the United States to shoulder the burden.

There are no shortcuts to peace that bypass security. Empowering Palestinians to assume security responsibility and continued measures to enhance the Palestinians' ability to keep their side of an agreement should be America's principal contribution to the peace process in the coming months.

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