

# Palestinian Moderates Need Help; the Time Is Now

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**F**or the past several years, Palestinian moderates often have been on the defensive amid the growth of Hamas (the Islamist Resistance Movement). The re-emergence of Palestinian moderates is key, as Israel and the Palestinians now try to restore their shattered partnership and head toward a Middle East peace meeting in November in Washington.

Ironically, the return of the moderates is facilitated by the rejectionist group's overreach. Hamas' takeover of Gaza in June is allowing the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank to be unshackled from Hamas radicalism. It is too soon, perhaps, to pronounce the eclipse of Hamas. But the moderates are starting to regain their footing.

The stakes are high. If the moderates fail, the Islamization of Gaza that is underway will likely, over time, spread to the West Bank. Transforming the Israeli-Palestinian dispute from a nationalist to a religious conflict would be catastrophic, making any peaceful resolution impossible.

Hamas' violent takeover of Gaza shocked Palestinians, and according to polls, many Palestinians see the move as undermining Hamas' credibility. According to a survey by the Nablus-based An-Najah University, 55.6 percent of Palestinians believe the Hamas seizure of Gaza on June 14 was a "coup." Furthermore, by 63.4 percent to 26.2 percent, the Palestinians do not believe Hamas is capable of managing the affairs of Gaza.

A separate poll by the Jerusalem Media Communication Center recently confirmed this finding, saying that the Palestinian Authority is governing the West Bank better than Hamas is ruling Gaza.

Fortunately for the moderates, there is a new Palestinian premier in the West Bank. Salaam Fayyad is a committed Palestinian nationalist who has demonstrated economic success amid trying conditions. Appointed by President Mahmoud Abbas, Fayyad has the necessary credentials: He holds a doctorate in economics and worked for the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank for 14 years. From 2002 to 2005, Fayyad was the authority's finance minister, and the post earned him a reputation for fighting corruption, including breaking up cartels and introducing fiscal transparency.

Fayyad and the authority still have to overcome many challenges if the West Bank is to be governed better than Gaza, thus vindicating moderation in the eyes of Palestinians. Fayyad must use his relationship with Fatah -- the mainstay of the Palestinian nationalist movement -- to carry out his efforts. The technocratic Fayyad needs Fatah's support to

achieve his goals, while Fatah seeks identification with a man whose distance from the party could improve its corrupt image.

Another major challenge for the Palestinian Authority is security. One can assume that Hamas has enough sympathizers in the West Bank to launch terror attacks in an effort to embarrass and undermine the authority. With that in mind, Fayyad summoned 800 imams from West Bank mosques into his office and boldly insisted that they remove all political messages from their sermons. Moreover, an authority cabinet minister just announced that the authority will close 103 charities suspected to be financial conduits for Hamas.

Last week marked the first time in years that Israeli and Palestinian West Bank commanders on all sides sat together to discuss restarting security cooperation. Geographic zones of cooperation will enable Israel to more rapidly lift checkpoints, thereby fostering economic trade. Lt. Gen. Keith Dayton, the U.S. security envoy, needs support if he is going to be helpful in rebuilding Palestinian security forces. But because of squabbles in Washington, Dayton -- who has been in the region for almost 10 months -- only started receiving money for his mission in the past few days.

Given the stakes, the differences in Washington should end. The security aid just dispatched should be coupled by housing and development assistance, thereby supporting Fayyad's reforms. In contrast, Hamas senior official Mahmoud Zahar reportedly has boasted that he has received \$400 million from Qatar, and Palestinians, among others, have asserted that an equal amount has come from Iran.

A final challenge is creating diplomatic momentum. If handled correctly, the November U.S.-backed peace meeting can galvanize the parties to make progress. But if there are unrealistically high expectations that the parties can resolve the most searing problems of their conflict -- including Jerusalem -- by the November parley, this could tragically trample whatever moves the parties do make.

After many years of terror and violence, the story is not that the sides would have resolved their conflict by November, but rather that an effort is under way to restore the shattered Israeli-Palestinian partnership. The glue for a revived partnership is the understanding that the alternative is Hamas, which threatens Israelis and Palestinians alike. It is essential that moderates, not radicals, be more determined this time to chart history's course.

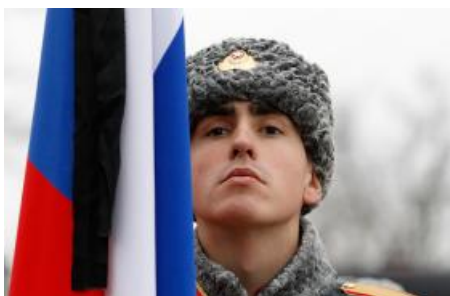
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