

Frame Work

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Articles & Testimony

In January, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice proclaimed her seriousness about trying to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. She declared that she had heard the calls of many of her colleagues internationally for the United States to become active again and push for Middle East peace. Since then, she has taken four trips to the region and met with her Quartet partners numerous times to promote agreement on a political horizon for the Israelis and Palestinians -- an agreement on the contours of a permanent status settlement.

With the collapse of Fatah forces in Gaza, however, that horizon seems more distant than ever. Hamastan appears to describe the reality there now, making questions about permanent status or concessions to refugees largely irrelevant for the time being. We should not yet give up on the idea of brokering a comprehensive ceasefire between the Israelis and Palestinians, but the focus now must shift to the competition between Fatah and Hamas.

I have no illusions about the difficulty of either task. And, in particular, I understand that Hamas might only prefer a ceasefire that provides it a respite or one they get on the cheap. If so, there would be no ceasefire. But it ought to be tested. While Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has declared an end to the national unity government, I have little doubt that he will be talking to Hamas in the relatively near future. His instinct and style are not to confront. And before he accepts a de facto situation in which Hamas seeks to govern Gaza and he seeks to govern the West Bank, he will explore what, if any, understandings are possible with Hamas.

With Israel desiring an end to rocket attacks, Hamas possibly deciding that it also needs calm (if for no other reason than to consolidate its hold on Gaza), and Fatah concluding that it can hardly remake itself while struggling with Hamas, there still could be a convergence of interest in having a real ceasefire. As Abbas falls back to talking to Hamas, it will make sense to probe whether a detailed understanding on a ceasefire with real obligations and real consequences for non-performance are possible.

But, even should a comprehensive ceasefire prove possible, it is essential to understand the larger reality in which it might take place: Competition between Fatah and Hamas in the West Bank is going to continue, as Hamas seeks to take over all the institutions of Palestinian political life -- the Palestinian National Council, the PLO, the presidency of the Palestinian Authority, and the Legislative Council. If Hamas wins this competition, it won't matter whether there is a ceasefire or even if there is a political horizon. Hamas won't accept a two-state solution or coexistence; at most it

will go along with periods of lull, perhaps even extended periods. But in the long run it is unlikely either to accept peace or renounce struggle and resistance.

So it is the competition with Hamas that should be our preoccupation. The United States should work with all the other donors to the Palestinians, and especially the Saudis and the Gulf states, to invest in those younger Fatah members who are prepared to organize themselves at the grassroots level and re-brand Fatah as a clean organization responsive to the needs of the Palestinian public. This is where the social, economic, and political competition will be won with Hamas, if it is to be won, particularly in the West Bank where Fatah still has the upper hand.

Secretary Rice's focus, unfortunately, is elsewhere. To be fair, her interest in a political horizon is at least partly shaped by her assessment that Fatah can be most helped by showing that there is a political way to end Israeli occupation and that Fatah can deliver it while Hamas cannot. She has a point. If the Palestinian public believes that Fatah offers a pathway to achieving their national aspirations and Hamas does not, Fatah would have an advantage. But when Fatah is perceived as corrupt and non-responsive to the public and unable to improve the day-to-day realities, the Palestinian public also tends to question whether Fatah is capable of delivering anything. A political horizon that is disconnected from the current realities that Palestinians are experiencing will lack credibility.

President Bush is planning to give a speech this month on the Arab-Israeli conflict. There are those in the administration, like Rice, who prefer the speech to be a blueprint for a resolution of the conflict -- or at least an American definition of the political horizon with the essential core tradeoffs on Jerusalem, refugees, and borders spelled out. Given the current situation in Gaza, however, such a speech could actually be counterproductive. Even if the U.S. plan for resolving the conflict could work if the circumstances were right, the circumstances are most certainly not right at the moment. An unrealistic plan will surely be criticized -- tainting potentially good ideas that might work later.

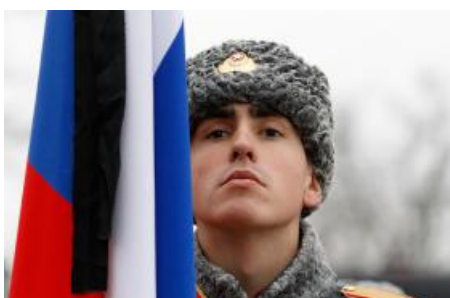
I hope that the speech will focus less on the political horizon and more on the challenge now facing Palestinians; they must decide what their identity is going to be. Will there still be a national movement seeking a secular Palestinian state that accepts a two-state solution, or will the Palestinian national cause lose its uniquely Palestinian identity as it is transformed into a religious movement whose aim is to be part of the "umma"? This is the issue, and it should be framed accordingly.

Dennis Ross is counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of the forthcoming [Statecraft: And How to Restore America's Standing in the World](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=270)

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