

Beyond the Dust

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Articles & Testimony

Behind the clouds of dust stirred up by the political skirmishing now going on between Hamas and Fatah, some truths have been obscured, truths that will not go away even if and when a government of national unity arises in the Palestinian Authority. Such a government will, in the last analysis, be no more than a ploy—more or less sophisticated—aimed at imposing a semblance of order on the internal scuffles plus, of course, getting the European Union to cancel or at least to ease the financial embargo on the Hamas government of Prime Minister Ismail Hanniyeh.

One of the obscured truths is that an unprecedented arms-acquisition effort is under way in the Gaza Strip. Close to 20 tons of standard explosives have been smuggled in since Israel withdrew last summer. Thousands of RPG grenade launchers and large quantities of rifles, pistols and grenades are coming in through the tunnels under the Philadelphi Route, separating the Strip from Egypt. Several Katyusha rocket launchers, like those used by Hizballah against northern Israel, are already in the hands of Hamas and other terror groups. It is only a matter of time before they also get hold of shoulder-launched anti-aircraft rockets and, even more troubling, third generation anti-tank missiles, like the Russian Koronet. Such weaponry will enable the terrorists to effectively target vehicles and structures 3-4 kms. inside Israel, and not to have to depend on their primitive high-trajectory Qassam rockets. Also under way is a feverish campaign to dig tunnels into Israel under the security barrier around the Strip, with the aim of facilitating terror attacks in Israel.

What all this means is that the Israeli government will have to decide sooner rather than later whether to implement the recommendation of the army and the security services to retake the area along the border between the PA and Egypt. Such a move will entail operating inside residential neighborhoods of the city of Rafiah, and will once again turn the Gaza Strip into a sealed-off enclave. The diplomatic harvest that Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert hoped to reap from the withdrawal will simply wither away. The alternative is for Gaza to continue becoming a huge stockpile of weapons and ammunition that must ultimately explode, with disastrous consequences.

Another obscured truth is that Fatah is not on the way back to power. PA President Abbas (Abu Mazen) and his Fatah cohorts are doing their best to hang on to their power and privileges, but they lack the momentum and the determination to go onto the offensive against Hamas, let alone dislodge the Islamist movement from power. In fact, Hamas is gradually penetrating the security apparatuses that were the heart of the Arafatian regime and which are rapidly ceasing to function in the West Bank, while in Gaza they are receding into a near-desperate defensive posture. The process of degeneration in Fatah is carrying on at full steam, not one of all the promises of reform has been kept. At most, Fatah will manage to survive as the junior partner to Hamas or, perish the thought, its fig leaf. Israel's partner in the Oslo process, the Palestinian element that is committed to compromise, in theory at least, is going bankrupt.

Yet another bitter truth: The implosion and disintegration of Palestinian society has not been halted. On the contrary, the deterioration of civil order, of the social fabric, of the arms of government, of public services, is continuing everywhere. Many believe that the point of no return has been passed and that chaos has become the

norm beside which all other political considerations pale into insignificance. Hamas has so far utterly failed to offer the public effective and normative governance, the impoverishment of broad sectors is ongoing, and personal security is dwindling away. Things have reached such a state that in a city like Hebron, and the same goes for East Jerusalem, there has been a meteoric revival of the Tahrir (Liberation) Party, an Islamic movement that eschews terror but preaches the renewal of the caliphate by means of some kind of a putsch. This is no more than a reflection of the disillusionment felt toward all of the old familiar organizations.

The same is true, incidentally, of the so-far limited phenomenon of local groupings, such as the Popular Resistance Committees, emulating the al-Qaeda model and going as far as attempting to become Bin Laden's Palestinian branch. Thus, the "Islamic Army" has declared its establishment in Gaza, and a series of Palestinian websites have recently become organs of the jihad according to the school of Sheikh Osama. Even in Hamas there is nervousness over this tendency among certain young Islamic circles.

These are the conditions on the ground, and this is the true course the Palestinian environment is taking, and for the foreseeable future at least, no hudna-style truce or new coalition can alter the bitter truths obscured by the dust.

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