

Deteriorating Security May Short-Circuit Israeli-Palestinian Opportunities

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Brief Analysis

The June 21 meeting between Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian Authority (PA) president Mahmoud Abbas highlighted the widening expectations gap between the two parties. Less than two months before Israel commences its pullout from the Gaza Strip and parts of the northern West Bank, the security situation is worsening, while the PA appears largely unprepared to assume effective security control over these areas. Without an urgent predisengagement “crash program” to improve security, the opportunity afforded by Yasser Arafat’s departure from the scene and Israel’s departure from Gaza will be lost.

Deteriorating Security

Although Israeli-Palestinian coordination seems to be improving as disengagement approaches, the security situation itself is deteriorating, in terms of both anarchy in the internal Palestinian scene and Palestinian violence against Israelis. The internal anarchy—inherited from the Arafat era—manifests itself in near-daily incidents of violence, including frequent attacks on government offices and institutions. On June 14, Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei threatened to “suspend the government’s responsibilities” if the security services do not quell the lawlessness. After all, his own winter home in Jericho was recently raided by gunmen, and he had to break off a visit to a refugee camp in Nablus a few days ago amid gunfire directed at the building where he was speaking.

On the Palestinian-Israeli front, increasing terrorist attacks are violating the teetering ceasefire secured between Abbas and the militant groups in March. The recent upsurge of violence includes not only more frequent rocket strikes by militant groups from Gaza, but also renewed attempts at suicide bombing and other forms of terrorism. Most of this increased activity can be attributed to Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), which recently decided to abandon the ceasefire, and to extremist Fatah cells (many of which are encouraged by Hizballah). In mid-June, for example, two Israelis were killed by PIJ shooting attacks in Gaza and the West Bank. Meanwhile, a twenty-one-year-old woman wearing explosives was captured while trying to cross from Gaza into Israel; she admitted to being recruited by Fatah activists and tasked with detonating herself in an Israeli hospital where she was scheduled to receive medical treatment.

Good intentions and rhetoric from PA officials about “one authority, one law, one gun” have not been matched by

deeds, and Abbas clearly seems to prefer co-optation to confrontation. On June 10, for example, in a bid to convince PIJ not to abandon the ceasefire, he ordered the release of operatives jailed on suspicion of involvement in a February suicide bombing in Tel Aviv. This did not prevent the escalation of PIJ attacks.

In addition, the essential reform of the Palestinian security services is advancing at much too slow a pace. To date, the PA has largely failed to implement the required consolidation of its numerous security services into three branches with a clear chain of command, as ordered by Abbas on April 14. Similarly, little action has been taken on the announced plan to recruit 5,000 qualified, “new blood” security personnel and to dismiss thousands of unqualified personnel from the current inflated force of 58,000.

Negative Dynamics

Several ongoing dynamics could spiral out of control if not checked and reversed. In particular, Abbas’s reluctance to enforce his authority and confront those who challenge his policy, including within his own Fatah movement, is perceived domestically as weakness, further eroding his political power. His failure to act plays into the hands of the organized and disciplined militant groups (most notably Hamas), which offer the public two key alternative benefits: a network of public services and a reputation of incorruptibility. These groups also exploit Abbas’s policy of co-optation in order to amass both military and political power. Indeed, time is not on Abbas’s side. If the militants translate their gains into convincing victories in the upcoming parliamentary elections, his room to maneuver will be further diminished, especially in terms of disarming them and providing security.

For its part, Israel is becoming increasingly irritated over the deteriorating security situation and the PA’s passivity. In addition to eroding Israeli public support for disengagement, these factors have made the government more disinclined to take risks in relaxing security measures, fearing that terrorist groups would fill the vacuum rather than the PA. Abbas is asking for more time and for supportive security concessions from Israel and the international community before he takes firm action against violence. Israelis, however, are demanding firm action now, well ahead of the disengagement, before they are willing to take further security risks. This gap has in turn exacerbated Palestinian disappointment with Abbas’s failure to deliver.

Recently, Israel decided to revert to its preceasefire counterterrorism activities against PIJ, including mass arrests and targeted killings of activists in the process of carrying out terrorist attacks. The current escalation endangers the ceasefire and may sweep Hamas to power, even though the group still prefers a general “calm down” in order to build its political muscle (unlike PIJ, which does not intend to run in the parliamentary elections).

A ‘Crash Program’ Is Warranted

Although the Gaza disengagement will probably go forth as scheduled in light of Sharon’s commitment, it could take place under fire and develop in a way that will negatively impact the aftermath. Hence, the current dangerous situation calls for immediate third-party intervention in order to push the Palestinian leadership in the right direction and bridge security gaps between the two parties.

First, the shaky ceasefire must be consolidated. Specifically, its terms should be clarified regarding what constitutes a violation, and the Palestinian leadership should be required to enforce these terms against violators such as PIJ (which is a much smaller and weaker group than Hamas). Otherwise, Hamas may join the fray, while Israel may step into the Palestinian security void to crack down on terrorists.

Second, bridging the current Israeli-Palestinian gaps requires a detailed outline of what the PA can and should do to prevent terrorism in the period leading up to the disengagement. Specific measures should cover such areas as dealing with “hot” threat warnings; investigating terrorist attacks once they occur; preventing the manufacturing, testing, and firing of rockets; preventing the smuggling of weapons through underground tunnels in the Rafah area; and confiscating illegal weapons from the public. Such requirements fall far short of both the comprehensive

dismantlement of terrorist infrastructure demanded by Israel and the Palestinian civil war feared by Abbas.

Third, the international community should push for an emergency reform program in the Palestinian security services in order to produce a core force of several thousand security personnel capable of performing the above tasks and assuming effective security control over Gaza once Israel departs.

Fourth, the PA should be encouraged to quickly develop a detailed security plan for handling the aftermath of the disengagement.

One would hope that the recently expanded mandate of the U.S. special security coordinator on the ground, Lt. Gen. William Ward, along with that of Quartet special envoy James Wolfensohn, will include these core security issues. Yet, implementation depends mostly on the leadership of Abbas. He was empowered by the people, who elected him on a platform of nonviolence and reform. It is not too late to draw on that mandate. He must take immediate action to stabilize security, with the help of vigorous international support. If he fails to do so, he will be unable to make the Gaza disengagement a success story for both parties or generate the dynamics for a meaningful political process in the future.

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