

Israeli Disengagement Frozen; de facto Palestinian Trusteeship

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Domestic politics in Israel and the Palestinian Authority were already unsettled before the kidnappings in Gaza and by Hizballah touched off the current confrontations. And while the outcome of the fighting remains uncertain, these events are likely to produce major changes in leadership and policies.

In Israel, the war in Lebanon has stressed and tested the coalition led by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Defense Minister Amir Peretz. The lack of military or diplomatic experience among these two top leaders is highly unusual (a point that did not escape Hassan Nasrallah) and is reflected in widespread criticism of their policies. They are likely to face formidable domestic challenges to their leadership in the coming months.

Olmert, who was selected by Ariel Sharon as deputy prime minister in reward for loyalty, suddenly took over following Sharon's stroke in January. He also inherited the leadership of the Kadima party, which was formed by centrist elements from the Likud and Labor. Sharon's decision to proceed with disengagement from Gaza in August 2005 triggered a major realignment in Israeli politics, and Kadima's main source of cohesion was support for extending unilateral separation to the Judea and Samaria regions of the West Bank.

While this process was supported by a majority of Israelis, there was also strong opposition, and even without the war in Lebanon it would have been difficult to gain agreement. The Hamas victory in the Palestinian elections and the growing missile and rocket attacks from Gaza raised additional doubts regarding further withdrawals. The kidnapping attacks from Gaza and Lebanon highlighted the importance of maintaining military control of territory. Indeed, Olmert's comment to a European journalist that a victory over Hizballah would promote the disengagement in the West Bank led to angry protests from many Israelis, and Olmert was forced to withdraw the statement. Although completion of the security/separation barrier will be accelerated and the demographic concerns remain, further Israeli disengagement will be delayed for many years. Even the long-planned removal of outposts will now be difficult for this government.

Furthermore, if the war in Lebanon does not end well for Israel and the Hizballah threat continues, Olmert and Peretz are likely to face major leadership challenges. The coming confrontation over the Iranian nuclear program and the repeated Iranian threats to "wipe Israel off the map" will add to these concerns. A number of former high-level IDF officers are positioned to present themselves as candidates, recognizing that an Israeli public that feels threatened is likely to turn to experienced military leaders.

On the Palestinian side, the intense focus on Hizballah has overshadowed the escalating military conflict that followed increased Qassam rocket attacks and the kidnapping of an Israeli soldier. The chaos and lack of control by the government

was highlighted by this incident, and there is little evidence that this situation is likely to change in the near term.

The continuing talks on a unity government between Fateh, led by President Mahmoud Abbas, and Hamas are seen as largely irrelevant in this context. In practice, Abbas appears powerless to implement even limited agreements with Israel that would provide some security, end the missile attacks from Gaza, and allow Israel to reopen border crossings for aid shipments. The official Hamas leadership is subordinate to Khaled Meshaal, who is based in Damascus. So even if an agreement on a new government were to be announced, the reality on the ground is not expected to change.

That reality is based on the relative power of Hamas and the legacy of failed governance following decades of control by Fateh. An agreement among the leaders of these two factions is unlikely to resolve the bitter fight over access to economic assets--external aid funding, control over customs and duties, income from monopolies and licenses, protection, etc.

Under these conditions, the Palestinian Authority is being transformed, de facto, into an international trusteeship (a framework floated by American former diplomat Martin Indyk a few years ago). Economic policy and major budgetary decision-making are increasing the responsibility of the World Bank and international aid organizations. Diplomatic contacts, including negotiations for providing access of aid conveys to Gaza, have been carried out by representatives of the Quartet--primarily the US and the European Union. And Israel has resumed full and direct responsibility for security, moving forces in and out of Gaza and the West Bank based on intelligence information regarding rocket production, explosives smuggling and planning for terror attacks.

This division is likely to be reinforced in coming months regardless of internal Palestinian agreements, including the announcement of a unity government under Abbas. Until basic changes in Palestinian self-governance take place and a more capable and pragmatic leadership emerges, de facto trusteeship is likely to continue.- *Published 7/8/2006 © bitterlemons.org*

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