

Options and initiatives for addressing the current impasse

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Introduction

The September obligations announced by President Mahmoud Abbas are approaching – the end to the period of negotiations, US President Barack Obama's vision of Palestine as a UN member state and the continuation of the government program (ending the occupation and the PA's preparedness for statehood). In light of these in addition to Israel's continued policies on the ground in the occupied territory, there are serious speculations as to whether the Palestinian Authority can continue or not, especially with the current political divisions. Another question is to what extent the PA in its current form and mechanisms can work towards ending the occupation.

As a continuation of previous policy meetings that discussed future options, this meeting focused on putting forth a strategy for creating a Unified National Front and shedding light on the necessary steps to achieve this as one possible method for addressing the current situation in the West Bank.

Contextual framework of National Front

This strategy adopts national action on a participatory basis to administrate the conflict with the Israelis in the West Bank in accordance with a national program to be formulated on a consensual basis. This can be achieved through dialogue among all the parties and led by the PLO as an alternative formula to the Palestinian Authority program. This program was established on a mandate from the PLO to administer the occupied territories after the transfer of authorities from Israel in accordance with the Oslo Accords. It was also according to the vision of the PLO to prepare the PA for transformation into statehood by the end of the transitional period in 1999.

The majority of those attending agreed that this formula and program had failed. They also agreed on the need for reconciliation between Palestinian political parties to create a unified front in the West Bank. In the event this scenario is not applicable in the Gaza Strip, we also need to find another formula exclusively for the Strip given that Hamas has not agreed to reconciliation without first guaranteeing major representation in the PLO. It is possible to have a special program for the PA in the West Bank and another in the Gaza Strip within a framework of understanding between Hamas and the PA.

The formula of a National Front in the West Bank does not require the dissolution of the PA but rather a change in its style and form of government. This would entail a new

“look” for the PA even while it retains the same name because of practical and international considerations. The PLO previously mandated the PA to assume responsibilities and authorities transferred from the Israeli military governor in the West Bank and Gaza. The Israeli side failed to complete this process in 1996 when it failed to complete the process of redeployment.

Hence, the change that needs to take place is in the mandate upon which the PA was created in 1994, which is transforming the PA’s program from self-government to a tool of resistance to end the occupation. It should also entail the fair distribution of available resources in the occupied areas in a way that would allow people to remain steadfast on the land.

Since the Palestinian people are still under occupation and ending this occupation is a comprehensive national program and not a government program carried out by the majority vote – thus making anyone else the opposition – there is an urgent need to change the current form of the PA in a way that the national program constitutes a national consensus (ending the occupation, self-determination, establishing the state and right of return). This would then be translated into a PA resistance program that all parties in the government would abide by. In this way, the goal of elections would be to elect different blocks based on their ability to implement this program. Their participation would hence be carried out according to the number of votes they receive.

The government would be comprised of a smaller number of ministers in addition to a number of state ministers in various districts. There is a need to carry out municipal elections as soon as possible in order to gain immediate legitimacy so they can practice their mandates in all Palestinian areas, even those on which Israeli military camps and settlements are built. They would be responsible for these areas to ensure an expansion of Palestinian areas in which friction with the occupation would naturally occur.

There is also a need to form national guidance committees at the level of governorates (which were successful in the period 1977-1982). Its basic role would be to lead national action in the regions. A sufficient budget would be allocated to municipalities from the government.

These parties would be in constant contact and coordination through mutual periodic reports. Through this partnership between the government, municipalities and national guidance committees, the PLO would thus have the tool with which to reactivate its role.

Challenges:

While those present all agreed on the need for strategies and options to address the current intractable situation, not all were in agreement about the strategy of a unified front. Some felt the assumption that all parties would focus their work on the higher national interest is not accurate. Others said the problem is not in the form and program of the PA but in its performance.

However, in light of Israel’s continued settlement policy and its occupation of the land, some called for a necessary review of the national program and a reassessment of the ability of an Authority that is linked to the occupation to actually end it, especially given that the legitimacy of institutions has begun to erode.

The PA takes its legitimacy, existence and its sustainability from two sources: the first is a mandate from the PLO's central council; the second is from the general elections of 1996 and the ratification of the basic law.

One participant said that betting on the American role to develop on its own merely because of the importance of establishing a Palestinian state has failed. Hence, it is necessary to call for the formulation of a long-term strategy to achieve the minimum ceiling of rights, especially with the September deadline for obligations approaching.

Recommendations:

- The need for a long-term strategy and a review of the national program in addressing the current challenges; we should also not put our wagers on the role of the US.
 - The need to reactivate the role of the PLO where it would have a practical role in communicating with the people.
 - A call for a national agenda for popular resistance in which the people and the Authority would participate under the leadership of a non-partisan national front.
 - A rethinking of the role of the PA, its current functions and structures.
 - Municipal elections must be held as soon as possible whereby the legitimacy of the municipalities can be reinstated.
 - The need to review all options suitable for extricating ourselves from the current situation while emphasizing that any call for the dissolution of the PA is unrealistic.
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