
NATIONAL COUNCIL ON CANADA-ARAB RELATIONS

CONSEIL NATIONAL DES RELATIONS CANADO-ARABES

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Policy Recommendations on Palestinian unity government

April 2007

The International Community's decision to withhold economic aid from the Palestinian governmental institutions, as well as the impounding, by Israel, of Palestinian indirect tax and VAT revenues has proved counterproductive. Not only has the embargo strengthened Hamas' legitimacy, but it has weakened Palestinian civil society, as well as the institutions and infrastructure built with international help. UNRWA Commissioner-General, Karen Koning AbuZayd, found it "especially frightening to see the impact of prolonged crises on every aspect of the Palestinian body politic: the deterioration of law and order; the unravelling of community cohesion; the rise in crime and internal violence; and the increasing radicalization of youth in an environment of economic and political hopelessness." As always with blunt instruments such as embargoes, ordinary people are the main victims. The man-made humanitarian crisis created in the occupied territory had all the effects of collective punishment on the Palestinian people.

Urgent warnings of impending catastrophe were issued by international organizations, especially for Gaza where the unemployment rate is untenably high. On December 7, 2006, fearing the worst, the UN launched "the largest appeal for emergency humanitarian assistance ever launched in the occupied Palestinian territory, and the third biggest in the world." (1) The appeal was also the third largest in the world, with only Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo projected to have higher humanitarian needs in 2007.

The World Bank cites the comprehensive Israeli system designed to restrict the movement of people and goods as having the main negative impact on the Palestinian economy. "The closures have made it nearly impossible for Palestinian enterprises to meet delivery schedules and have dramatically raised costs, effectively excluding most Palestinian producers from the world economy..... The combined impact of these impediments, coupled with complex permit restrictions, has been a fragmentation of the socio-economic space in the West Bank into a northern, a central and a southern economic zone, bounded on three sides by the separation barrier and to the west by a Jordan Valley, a significant agricultural area, that is increasingly difficult for Palestinians to access." (2)

A joint draft report by the World Food Programme (WFP) and Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), states that nearly half the households in Gaza and the West Bank are malnourished, the "problem [being] primarily a function of restricted economic access to food resulting from ongoing political conditions." (3) Visible effects of malnutrition such as reduced growth, vitamin deficiencies and anaemia are now current amongst the most vulnerable elements of Palestinian society.

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The scarcity of clean water, an increase in water-borne diseases from untreated sewage, a health system under extreme stress without stable power or basic life saving medications have caused a rise in avoidable Palestinian fatalities. The lack of funding has also obliged municipalities to forego basic services such as garbage collection, creating another health and environment hazard for the population.

The national unity government offers the international community the opportunity to re-engage and help shepherd the two sides towards a just peace. Some, like Norway, have already recognized the new Palestinian government, others have decided to deal selectively with members of the government. All have slightly shied away from maintaining the boycott.

This shift in diplomacy is based on the strong belief that the Palestinians sent a signal of moderation and pragmatism when they formed the unity government. While the international community welcomed their efforts, Israel has taken a rejectionist position and continues to insist that the demands made by the Quartet be fully met. The Quartet principles may be a key element of a durable peace, but peace needs that both sides renounce violence against civilians, something that Israel has not demanded from either its military forces or its settler population in the occupied Palestinian territory.

The formation of the unity Palestinian government represents an important step towards peace. The broad-based coalition includes all the different parliamentary groups in the Palestinian Legislative Council are represented. Its political platform states explicitly that the unity government:

- respects international law and all existing agreements signed by the PLO;
- acknowledges that negotiations are the mandate of the PLO;
- entrusts President Abbas, as the legitimate Palestinian negotiator, to conduct negotiations to end the conflict;
- has defined as its goal a solution based on two states through the establishment of a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders and the consolidation of a strong foundation for peace, security and prosperity for present and future generations in the entire region;
- has reaffirmed that, as the international community has acknowledged, ending the occupation is an essential requirement for resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. It has expressed its commitment to work with the international community to achieve these objectives;
- has also made a firm commitment to a comprehensive reciprocal ceasefire, and indicated that it will work with all concerned partners for the release of Gilad Shalit on the basis of an exchange of prisoners.

The international community intends to judge this government on the basis of its actions

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and not on statements. It must work with and through the institutions of the Palestinian Authority that it had itself helped create, instead of devising ways to by-pass them. Steps must be taken immediately to strengthen these institutions, to reverse the humanitarian crisis and to rebuild the Palestinian economy.

The International Crisis Group recommends dealing pragmatically with all members of the unity government: “If the international community is serious about its proclaimed goals, it will help bring stability to the Palestinians and broker a comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire, permit the unity government to govern and press for meaningful negotiations between Abbas and Olmert. It will see Mecca as an opportunity to revive the peace process, rather than as yet another excuse to bury it.” (4)

NCCAR recommends therefore that Canada normalize relations with the new unity government immediately and promote the resumption of comprehensive final status negotiations to end the conflict, as called for by the Arab Peace Initiative. A just peace is the only way to ensure security for Israelis, Palestinians and the whole region.

Endnotes:

(1) Occupied Palestinian territory 2007. Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP)
http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/CAP_2007_Summar_eng.pdf

(2) WEST BANK AND GAZA INVESTMENT CLIMATE ASSESSMENT:
UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR. March 20, 2007.
Finance and Private Sector Development Group, Social and Economic Development Department, Middle East and North Africa Region.
<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWESTBANKGAZA/Resources/294264-1166008938288/ICA2007.pdf>

(3) DRAFT CFSVA for WBGS—21 February 2007. *Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis (CFSVA)*. West Bank and Gaza Strip.
<http://imeu.net/engine/uploads/wfp-food-security.pdf>

(4) After Mecca: Engaging Hamas. *Middle East Report* N°62. 28 February 2007.
<http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=4677&l=1>