

Palestine: risk of civil war

Sunday 14 January 2007, by [WARSCHAWSKI Michael](#) (Date first published: 4 January 2007).

The United States and Israel are trying to strengthen the president of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas (Fatah), at the expense of the Prime Minister, Ismaïl Haniyeh (Hamas). Consequence: inter-Palestinian confrontations have multiplied, and the risks of a civil war have increased.

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“Abu Mazen [Abbas] must be strengthened!” is the new slogan which, in the Israeli consensus, substitutes for a strategy. Raised by Condoleezza Rice during the visit to Washington two months ago by the Israeli Prime minister, Ehud Olmert, it has been fulsomely endorsed by Israeli politicians accustomed to doing the bidding of the Empire.

But it is one thing to say “yes, boss!”, entirely another to give a content to this slogan. Until now, the “strengthening of Abu Mazen” has amounted to a resounding kiss, followed by a dinner at Olmert’s residence and a cheque for some hundred thousand dollars. The kiss embarrassed the Palestinian president, the meal wasn’t bad and the dollars... in any case belong to the Palestinians, and were withheld illegally in the coffers of the Israeli treasury.

Even the liberation of some hundreds of Palestinian detainees - the only measure that would have been appreciated by the Palestinians of the occupied territories - has not been conceded by Olmert, transforming the kiss into the most compromising clinch for the Palestinian president, whose brand ‘image is already sufficiently degraded and who had no need for this hypocritical mark of friendship in order to be accused by some of his own party activists of becoming, if not a collaborator, at least a puppet in the hands of the Americans.

The strengthening of Abu Mazen is aimed at weakening the Hamas government, massively elected and still supported by the majority of Palestinians. To do that, it would be necessary to show the Palestinian people that, unlike Hamas, Abu Mazen could obtain a freeze on settlements - to which Israel committed itself in the roadmap, nearly five years ago! - and, in the framework of rapid and effective negotiations with Israel, to put an end to 40 years of occupation. But that is obviously not in the programme of the government of national union of Olmert and Amir Peretz.

How can one hope to strengthen Abu Mazen, when the settlements continue in an accelerated fashion and, in contrast to the time of Ariel Sharon, are boasted about by Olmert and Peretz, who have both announced the reconstruction of a settlement in the Jordan valley? This declaration provoked the ire of the US State department, which wants at any price to give the impression that if things are not improving in Israeli-Palestinian relations, at least they are not getting worse. How does it strengthen Abu Mazen when he is given some hundreds of thousands of dollars, while the Prime minister, Ismaïl Haniyeh, is prevented from bringing in several billion dollars which Iran has just donated to the Palestinian Authority?

The Algerian strategy

Weary of the impossible (under current conditions) task of trying to weaken Hamas through strengthening of Abu Mazen, some close to the US president and the CIA, on the one hand, and the Israeli secret services, on the other, prefer the Algerian method of 1992, of overthrowing the legitimate government by force, even if it foments a civil war. This is the background to the bloody confrontations in Gaza in recent weeks between the militants of Fatah and Hamas, for which Fatah bears the entire responsibility. Fatah, or rather a current within Fatah, that could be called the "Algerian current" or the "eradicator current" is encouraged by Washington and Tel-Aviv and is ready to overthrow Hamas to regain power... and its emoluments.

As the Algerian case has shown, such manoeuvres will only boost the popularity of Hamas, inasmuch as the self-styled knights of democracy and secularism who dream of overthrowing the legitimate government, like Muhammad Dahlan, the former security chief in Gaza, have a rather sulphurous brand image, in contrast to Hamas who nobody can accuse of embezzlement or corruption. Yasser Arafat will go down in history as someone who ready to sacrifice his own freedom to prevent a fratricidal war between Palestinians and counter the combined pressure of Tel-Aviv and Washington. Mahmoud Abbas has neither the stature nor the prestige of the founder of the PLO and even if it is unjust to accuse him of trying to foment a civil war, he is attempting to satisfy the White House by trying to destabilise the legitimate power so as to impose a government which would give veto power to those precisely who the voters wanted to punish.

A constitutional situation which creates, de facto, a dual power - that of the Legislative Council and that of the president, both elected by universal suffrage - gives a legal opening to the manoeuvres of Abbas. But, in the eyes of the majority of Palestinians, they smell of a shady deal with Bush and Olmert.

An eloquent balance sheet

In 2006, the Israeli armed forces killed 660 people in the occupied territories and in Israel. Among them, 322 were taking no part in hostilities at the time of their death, and 22 died as a result of targeted assassinations. The Palestinians have killed 17 Israeli civilians and six soldiers.

In November 2006, Israel held 9,075 Palestinian prisoners, of which 738 are in administrative detention, without indictment or judgement. [1]

Notes

[1] Source: B'Tselem, Israeli centre for information on human rights in the occupied territories.

P.S.

* From Internatinal Viewpoint Online magazine : IV n° 385 - January 2007.

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