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## Bolstering Palestinian Moderates

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[1]

The recent breach of the Gaza-Egypt border was an avoidable setback to the newly revived Palestinian-Israeli peace process. It has shown what happens when grand political commitments — made by Israeli, U.S. and Arab leaders — fail to translate into concrete policies, structures and behavior. Had the situation been addressed in a timely fashion, control of the Gaza crossings to Egypt and Israel could have been a major political gain for the moderate government of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad. Instead, Hamas used the delay in resolving the matter to create new facts on the ground to its benefit.

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After Hamas's violent takeover of Gaza in June, Israel imposed a tight closure on Gaza, whereby people and goods were not allowed to enter or go out. Mr. Fayyad has long been proposing that Israel allow the Palestinian Authority (PA) to assume responsibility over the crossing points from Gaza to Egypt and Israel.

In addition to alleviating the humanitarian situation in Gaza and ensuring that the civilian population is not punished, this would have put Hamas on the defensive: It would have been faced with the choice of either accepting PA control of the borders (and by implication ceding a good measure of power in Gaza), or rejecting it, in which case the borders will remain closed and Hamas would pay a political price as it becomes seen by the international community as being responsible for the continuation of the Gaza closure.

Rather than expeditiously responding to this request and seizing the opportunity, the Israeli authorities went into default mode, subjecting it for months to endless negotiations and interminable examination and re-examination. Hamas, for its part, bided its time, and, riding the wave of public protests in the wake of the Israeli decision to cut fuel supplies to Gaza, caused the breach in the border. Hamas was quick to claim — as it did in the aftermath of the unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 — that the negotiations espoused by the moderates do not pay and that violence is the only way to achieve results.

The first lesson to be learned concerns Israel: New times require new action. Israeli behavior vis-a-vis the PA is still governed by the paradigm, mentality and protocols developed since the beginning of the Intifada to deal with a state of active conflict with the PA. The only consideration in dealing with the Palestinian side is security in the narrowest, most technical sense, even if this ends up being prohibitive to the implementation of Palestinian plans and proposals.

This approach is inappropriate during a peace process and fails to take note of three major recent developments. First is the election of Mahmoud Abbas as president and the subsequent appointment of Salam Fayyad as prime minister. Both leaders have longstanding peace credentials and a commitment and track record on good governance and security. Second is the ascendance of Hamas and its subsequent takeover of the Gaza Strip. Third is the launching of the Annapolis process which is intended to recreate the spirit of partnership and resolve both long-term peace issues along with the more immediate issues of security and rebuilding the PA.

These events have brought into sharp focus the two alternative paths that the Palestinian polity may take: either violence and fundamentalism as advocated by Hamas or security and peace as presented by the Abbas-Fayyad team. The result is highly contingent on the moderates' ability to deliver in terms of concrete improvements in Palestinians' daily lives and in the larger peace process.

While the commitment of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to the peace process is not in doubt, it is obvious that this commitment has yet to lead to a new approach to the PA in practice. Mr. Fayyad continues to be nickel and dimed, whether regarding the proposed assumption of responsibility over the Gaza crossings or generally the gradual assumption of a degree of security control over the West Bank. In the meantime, as the PA struggles to meet the minutiae of Israeli security demands, Hamas continues to enjoy — and politically benefit from — the flexibility afforded by not being bound by any agreements or bilateral obligations.

Israel needs to develop a new paradigm based on partnership with the PA. The success of the Abbas-Fayyad government is in the interest of both the Palestinians and the Israelis, and a new approach is needed to ensure that this partnership thrives. New considerations must be factored in when making decisions regarding the PA. One is the extent to which such decisions will enable the PA to deliver to its own public and by implication gain strength and to which extent it would enable Hamas to reassert its central message that diplomacy is futile.

The first test will come soon when the issue of the crossings is raised again. Public statements made by Israeli officials indicate that Israel is willing to give the PA control over the Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt, but not the crossings between Gaza and Israel. Such a decision would allow Hamas to claim credit for the reopening of the Rafah crossing and would accrue minimal — if any — political benefits to the Palestinian leadership. Instead, Israel must allow the PA to assume responsibility over all of the Gaza crossings, and in doing so enable it to deliver services to the civilian population and weaken Hamas' grip over Gaza.

There are also lessons to be drawn by the Arab governments. Prior to the border breach, Egypt tried a policy regarding Hamas that employed both pressure and incentives, but the implementation of the pressure element was often lax. Instead of taking note and working with Egypt to stabilize the border, Hamas acted in its narrow self-interest and left

Egypt to pay the political, diplomatic and security price. Egypt seems to have initiated a much tougher policy in the last few days. The conflict between the PA and Hamas is a zero-sum one, in which other actors involved in Palestinian affairs must take a side. Failure to act against Hamas translates into implicit support for it. A Hamas victory will have direct implications for many Arab regimes. Hamas is an extension of the larger Muslim Brotherhood movement whose aim is to assume — not share — power throughout the Arab world. Islamic parties throughout the Arab world will be keeping a close watch on the outcome of the politics in Palestine, and would be greatly emboldened by a Hamas victory. Any Arab government that thinks that it can appease Hamas or manage it will discover the cost the hard way, as Egypt did.

The U.S. administration should also examine its approach to the conflict. The commitment of both President Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is beyond question, and indeed the relaunching of the peace process would not have been possible without their efforts. Both realize that Palestinian-Israeli peace will go a long way toward achieving U.S. national security interests in the region.

This commitment, however, has yet to manifest itself in the form of a solid, coherent diplomatic infrastructure on the ground. Disparate pieces of such an architecture exist in the form of three U.S. generals, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair's mission and the U.S.-Palestinian Partnership for economic aid. But they still lack a unifying structure.

Until the United States offers not only general guidance but also process management, the Palestinians and the Israelis (each of whom is operating within a complex domestic political environment and in the midst of an active conflict) will more likely fall back on their default negative dynamic.

The political will that exists in Washington now needs to lay down a track on the ground that leads to a Palestinian state and end this conflict.

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