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As Hamas rises, peace prospects sink, observers say

Media Mention of Hussein Ibish in USA Today - March 18, 2013 - 11:00pm

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/03/18/hamas-israel-no-peace/199731...> [1]

President Obama visits Israel and the West Bank capital of Ramallah this week in a Middle East that has changed so dramatically that the two-state solution he has championed seems more than ever a mirage.

The Palestinian terror group Hamas, which controls the Gaza Strip, has gained prominence partly because of Arab Spring uprisings that swept anti-Israeli and anti-Western Islamist movements into power. Hamas' rise may have wrecked chances for an agreement between Israelis and Palestinians, some analysts say.

While working to expand its influence, Hamas leaders don't want yet another bruising confrontation with Israel, but they also "don't want a peace process," says Aaron David Miller, who has been an adviser to six Republican and Democratic secretaries of State on Arab-Israeli negotiations and is now vice president at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. "They can't participate in it both ideologically and from a practical point of view."

The results of fighting in November between Hamas and Israel showed that the hard-line Islamist group that rejects the idea of a two-state solution is adept at using violence to obtain political results, friends, and greater influence at the cost of the Palestine Liberation Organization, which controls the West Bank and has committed to seeking peace through talks and coordination with Israel.

There is no way that Hamas will refrain from spoiling talks between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, or any agreement they produce, says Michael Rubin, a former Pentagon adviser under former president George W. Bush, who is now at the American Enterprise Institute.

In any agreement that would satisfy fewer than 100% of Palestinian demands, "Hamas could say wait 10 years, we could have a one-state solution," Rubin says. Using rocket attacks on Israel to

siphon off Palestinian support and alienate Israelis, "they can act as a spoiler and claim Palestinian nationalism."

The Israeli ambassador to Washington, Michael Oren, says Israel has no illusions that Hamas is anything other than a terrorist organization that urges Muslims to kill all Jews. But Oren says Hamas is not necessarily a deal breaker, even though it refuses to accept Israel's existence.

"Israel believes that it can reach an agreement with the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, with the hope that the Palestinians of Gaza will see the advantages to peace and throw off Hamas' rule," Oren told USA TODAY.

The approach Oren describes is the only option because reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas "is on oxygen," says Hanan Ashrawi, a PLO Executive Committee member who was elected in 2006 to the Palestinian Legislative Council. Fatah is the political party of the PLO based in the West Bank.

Ashrawi says Palestinians will settle their differences through elections if they have an agreement with Israel, but she blames Israel for not producing one. Focusing on Hamas is a distraction preferred by those in Israel and the West who she says oppose a peace agreement that would create a Palestinian state, she says.

"We will be able to deliver on any commitments we make and any agreement," Ashrawi says. "The problem is Israel has refused to cooperate with giving us any agreement."

When asked whether Hamas could take over the West Bank, many Palestinians in Ramallah responded that the question is ludicrous. At his family-owned housewares store, Taher Awad, 24, acknowledged that Hamas gained a great deal of respect among Palestinians by standing up to Israel. But he said most West Bank Palestinians he knows would reject the Islamist group as rulers.

"Hamas imposes a very strict form of Islam. I'm in favor of Islam, but here I can walk outside with my girlfriend. If I wanted to sell champagne or beer, it wouldn't be a problem," Awad said.

Yet the hope that decades of strife here can be resolved by West Bank Palestinians making a deal for a peaceful Palestinian state has more hurdles now than it did four years ago at the outset of Obama's presidency.

Four years ago, Hamas was a pariah with little international prestige. But leaders of Turkey, Qatar and other nations have made official visits to Gaza in recent months and called for the European Union to end its designation of the group as a terrorist entity. Four years ago, Egypt to the south was run by a military dictator who opposed Hamas' ideological ally, the Muslim Brotherhood. Today, Egypt's legislature and presidency is controlled by the Muslim Brotherhood.

In October, the Emir of Qatar, Sheik Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, pledged \$400 million of aid to Gaza, and other Arab nations whose governments were captured by Islamists in the Arab Spring

revolts and elections pledged their allegiance. And in November, Hamas orchestrated a sustained rocket barrage over two weeks that Israel answered with airstrikes. Hamas secured a partial lifting of Israel's blockade, in place since Hamas took control of Gaza by force, and elicited cheers from much of the Arab world.

But there are signs Hamas may be losing support. Egypt, citing a need to keep weapons from reaching extremists in Egypt's Sinai desert, has been flooding smuggling tunnels that in the past Hamas has used to rearm. And a poll by Ramallah-based Arab World for Research and Development say Hamas has lost favor with the Palestinian public that wants peace and elections and is shifting its loyalty to Fatah.

Bassem Zubeidy, political scientist at Birzeit University in the West Bank, says Hamas' good fortune was temporary.

"Initially, their hopes were very high that these new regimes would be supportive of Hamas in Gaza but, surprisingly, that has not been the case," Zubeidy said.

Other analysts say peace will come not by grand bargains shepherded by the White House but by mutual acts of cooperation between the Palestinian Authority and Israeli government, ongoing for years, which has been improving security and quality of life for Palestinians.

Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayad have already begun the groundwork for that approach in the West Bank, which has been so calm recently that no Israeli lives were lost to acts of terror there in more than a year, says Hussein Ibish, an analyst at the American Task Force on Palestine, a think tank in Washington. Improved security prompted Israel to permit economic development aid and reduce military security roadblocks in the West Bank.

Palestinian security forces have worked with Israel to establish law and order, which has been followed by increased foreign investments from Europe, the USA and Arab states. Department stores, cinemas and malls are growing, Ibish says.

Palestinian leaders in the West Bank wanted to show Israel and world that they could be trusted to establish order if given independence, Ibish says. But the Palestinian Authority, and Abbas, run a risk of being seen by Palestinians as "enforcing the occupation," Ibish says.

"We were on tenterhooks about whether the West Bank would erupt," Ibish says. "Hamas' challenge to the PLO is entirely derived from there being some cachet to their argument that negotiations will in fact not yield independence."

In downtown Ramallah, Maher Salamah, 50, gazes out the window of his women's clothing store at well-dressed passersby in the West Bank's financial and administrative hub. Salamah said he has little hope that President Obama will be able to help.

"It looks quiet enough, but underneath things are simmering," he said, alluding to disquiet over the lack of a state and the poor economy. "We want borders, an airport; we want a state, we want freedom."

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