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ATFP Carnegie Briefing Explores Issues of Palestinian Unity, Hamas and Fall Mideast Meeting

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Press Release

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Washington, D.C., October 3 -- The American Task Force on Palestine (ATFP) held a briefing today at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The briefing, moderated by Ambassador Samuel Lewis, was titled "Palestinian Unity: The Question of Hamas". ATFP Advocacy Director Mr. Ghaith Al-Omari and Dr. Robert Malley, Middle East and North Africa Program Director at the International Crisis Group, answered four questions in turn presented by Ambassador Lewis, two on the issue of Palestinian unity and Hamas and two on the fall Mideast meeting.

The first question posed concerned the policy of building up the West Bank while isolating Hamas in Gaza, the likely end game of such a policy, and the possibility of Hamas sabotaging the West Bank effort. Malley argued that there are real limitations hamstringing any substantial progress in the West Bank and in reaching an agreement with Israel. He added that until the Palestinians 'conclude the evolution of their political system' it was hard to imagine that the Palestinians will accept having to make the concessions that Palestinian president Abbas may present as part of an agreement with Israel, nor could the Palestinian Authority (PA) implement an agreement given the weakness of the security apparatus and Hamas opposition.

Al-Omari responded by saying that ultimately Hamas, as representing a sizable Palestinian Islamist constituency, has to be engaged and become part of the political system. However on the question of timing, he said that Abbas cannot engage with them in the immediate future due the political cost of 'legitimizing' Hamas' Gaza take-over, and the real possibility of the re-cutting of international aid. Past attempts at national unity had papered over serious Hamas-

Fatah differences and without Hamas accepting the PLO charter, UNSCR 242 and the two-state solution reconciliation was unlikely. Omari added that Hamas had weakened itself with its Gaza take-over and its ability to sabotage peace negotiations. If the PA is perceived as beginning a serious process of security and governance reform, coupled with movement on the peace front, in the short term the West Bank could present a model in contrast with the Hamas model in Gaza.

The second question concerned whether Hamas was a monolith or whether there existed factional differences, particularly between the religious and nationalist strains, that could be exploited. Omari answered that the Gaza take-over reflected differences within Hamas, with the power dynamics shifting in favor of the more hardcore elements. As such, 'engaging Hamas at this time would legitimize these elements and their violent take-over.' Malley's answer diverged on this issue by arguing that we should not wait until any divisions within Hamas were clarified, but should try and strengthen the more moderate elements with Arab countries providing the back channels for talks. Not talking to Hamas would empower the radical elements.

The third question focused on the fall Mideast meeting, projected for late November in Annapolis, MD. Malley said that failure would result in serious damage to all parties. While a detailed final-status agreement was not an option, what was likely was a statement, based on core issue parameters, that allows both Israelis and Palestinians to claim that they had begun a serious process. Omari defined success for the meeting as the setting of general contours of a permanent deal giving momentum to a robust process that would follow. This process must include elements distinguishing it from previous processes, such as staggered Arab participation, rewards for both parties, reversal of Israeli actions in Jerusalem and some type of settlement freeze to start. He added that success should not be defined solely by a detailed document produced by the meeting nor by Arab participation.

The final question dealt with the issue of the role of the U.S. in terms of presidential backing for Secretary Rice's efforts and possible pressure on Israelis and Palestinians to cross their minimum 'red lines' possibly resulting in Saudi attendance at the meeting. Omari responded by saying that President Bush was backing Rice in her efforts, but it was unlikely that the Saudis would attend without a real breakthrough. Saudi attendance would be 'a huge gain for Israel' and Omari was unsure Israel was willing to pay the political price for it, although he foresaw the possibility of future Saudi engagement as the post-meeting process unfolds. He added that the U.S. would not push Israel to the point of confrontation with pressure on Abbas as the weakest link being more likely, although he cautioned against that.

Malley agreed that it would be difficult for the Saudis to attend, adding that there were regional reasons for that too. The U.S. would not push Israel to cross any red lines, adding that the Palestinians too would be reluctant to get into too many details on an agreement due to 'sensitive issues like the refugees' preferring to emphasize developing a robust process to follow.

In the Q&A session that followed, Omari noted that the situation in Gaza was not only a humanitarian one but also an economic one with the collapse of the private sector. This situation hurts not only the Gazans, but also Abbas and Fayyad. Malley noted a positive evolution in terms of the Israeli political elite and public opinion regarding perceiving a Palestinian state as an Israeli interest, but added that this had not yet translated into political decisions. The question was whether this positive evolution regarding a Palestinian state could catch up with facts on the ground working to undermine a two-state solution.

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