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TEIM Election Watch Analysis

PRE-ELECTION ANALYSIS:

PALESTINE/ National reconciliation – a sine qua non for fixing the date of presidential and legislative elections

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Egyptian mediators have been trying for over a year to broker reconciliation and national unity among the Palestinian factions, especially between the two major parties, Fatah and Hamas. This "unity" was definitively broken in June 2007, when the Islamic Resistance Movement took control of the Gaza Strip and drove out those forces loyal to Mahmoud Abbas, after a tense co-existence in the government they had formed over the prior 18 months. The result so far: one government in Gaza led by Hamas and another in the West Bank led by the Palestinian National Authority (PNA).

Throughout the summer, meetings held in Cairo between Egyptian officials and various representatives of each Palestinian faction have intensified. As a result of these meetings and the small steps and concessions that each side seemed willing to make concerning different issues (for example, regarding the release of political prisoners imprisoned in Gaza and especially in the West Bank, or the creation of joint security forces in both areas), it was thought that the appropriate time and conditions for ending the impasse in which Palestinian politics has been immersed, would be reached between the months of September (a good occasion because of the month of Ramadan) and October.

However, when everything seemed to be heading in the right direction and a definitive date was about to be set for holding presidential and legislative elections, the 'Goldstone Report' appeared on the scene, endangering the Palestinian political sphere once again. The report accuses Israel of committing war crimes against humanity in the Gaza bombing of December 2008. It was presented to be ratified by the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva on October 2, but what was the surprise when it was the Palestinian Authority itself that asked for the vote to be postponed until March 2010, thus hindering the enforcement of the Report's recommendations, namely, taking the first step towards commencing legal proceedings against those responsible and imposing sanctions on Israel. From that time on, all the Palestinian political factions and civil groups, including some within the ranks of Fatah - the party that holds a majority in both the PNA and PLO - have vigorously condemned and criticized the position of Abu Mazen and his followers.

Hamas' response to this action has been firstly to postpone the reconciliation document that was due to be signed on October 24 in Cairo, but subsequently, after the "Goldstone storm" had passed, it expressed its nonconformity - like the other Palestinian factions - with the new text supplied by the Egyptians. According to statements made by the Islamic Movement and other parties to the Arab network Al-Jazeera, on 15 and 18 October, new items have been included while others that had previously been agreed on are absent. They maintain that the new sections do not include Palestinian national rights.

The Egyptian reconciliation document

Initially this document was produced according to the conditions set by the different factions at each meeting. It was supposed to form a solid foundation which would serve as a "prelude" for an ultimate Palestinian reconciliation. The most important aspect of the Egyptian initiative is, that it sets a date for presidential and legislative elections to take place on June 28, 2010 (a date agreed to by all sides). Besides this, it states that the parties would not have to immediately form a government of national unity - Hamas would continue to govern in Gaza and the PA in the West Bank until the election. There would also be an exchange of prisoners between the two camps and the Palestinian security

forces would be restructured. Hamas would have to allow Fatah supporters entry to a unified security force in Gaza and the West Bank, while a commission would go about preparing the elections.

Faced with the new document submitted by Egypt, Hamas and some other Palestinian factions have said they will not sign unless the current proposal is modified to include the question of national rights. The document notably does not include the right to resist Israeli occupation and the right of return of refugees.

Fatah, however, has approved the document, signing and handing it over on 15 October. Mahmoud Abbas has also threatened the others parties that, if they do not give their response quickly, he will call snap elections on the date elections should take place – i.e. in January 2010 instead of June 2010 as mentioned in the document. The Egyptian Foreign Minister, Ahmed Aboul-Gheit has further added to these pressures, stating that the reconciliation document presented is "to sign and not to negotiate" and that if Hamas does not accept, Egypt will be forced to close the tunnels that link Gaza with Egypt.