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U.S. Policy and Palestine: Reform and Peace are Interdependent

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Since 2002, U.S. diplomacy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been constrained by Israel's doctrine that there is no Palestinian partner for peace. According to this concept—accepted by the United States—until Palestinians halt violence toward Israel and reform their internal politics, there can be no peace talks.

The rationale of the no-partner policy during the era of PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was that Israel should not be expected to negotiate in the face of terrorism. Even after a unilateral Palestinian ceasefire helped end the second intifada in February 2005, however, the “no partner” policy persisted and an important window of opportunity was missed. The policy was then reinforced by the election of the Hamas government in January 2006 and demands by Israel and the United States that Hamas recognize Israel, forswear violence, and accept all past agreements as conditions for renewed negotiations.

Whatever U.S. intentions have been, the actual effect of U.S. policy—together with unilateral Israeli actions that seem designed to foreclose negotiated compromises—has been renewed violence and a further breakdown of the Palestinian political order. Placing the burden of change solely on the Palestinians without offering them hope and incentives and without asking for reciprocal moves by Israel, is unrealistic. A viable U.S. policy should recognize that Palestinian violence and disorder are mainly symptoms of the deeper conflict over occupation and sovereignty. These symptoms will persist as long as real Palestinian statehood is denied, and U.S. efforts to influence and reform internal Palestinian politics will be marginal or counterproductive.

U.S. policies toward Palestinian reform to promote peacemaking have been erratic. In the 1990s Washington condoned Arafat's authoritarianism to support fighting terror. During the second intifada that began in autumn 2000, the United States sought to curb Arafat via

creation of a prime minister, rationalization of Palestinian security forces, and fiscal reforms. When Arafat's more cooperative and reform-minded successor, President Mahmoud Abbas, took office and appealed for new peace talks in 2004, he received only friendly words from Washington and no support from Israel.

Before the Palestinian parliamentary elections, the United States also championed democratic processes for Palestinians. But after Hamas won in January 2006, the United States not only boycotted Hamas officials and mobilized a cutoff of economic aid until Hamas met the three conditions, but it also changed course on reform. Washington reversed its policy of empowering a prime minister and security reform (pursued while Arafat was alive) and instead sought to strengthen President Abbas vis-à-vis the elected Hamas government and Prime Minister Ismail Haniyya. To this end, in addition to the aid cutoff, the United States is now training and arming a Presidential Security Guard that will report to Abbas rather than the Hamas-led Ministry of Interior. Washington is also funding programs to strengthen Abbas's defeated Fatah party and other independent parties in order to create alternatives to Hamas.

U.S. convolutions on democracy and reform and a lack of clarity on the core issues of Israeli-Palestinian conflict have serious repercussions. U.S. efforts to manipulate internal Palestinian politics, which resemble failed Israeli efforts in the past, are unlikely to succeed. Indeed, the cutoff of aid and other efforts to change the internal balance against Hamas have so far weakened Abbas more than Hamas. Hamas has sustained its social and welfare programs, while PA institutions such as schools and hospitals are in danger of collapse. At a time of deepening and increasingly violent Hamas-Fatah rivalry, efforts to shore up Abbas and Fatah through a Presidential security force might encourage Palestinian civil war. The starvation of government—including security agencies—has also encouraged violence and gangsterism. And Israel's reliance on massive force in its renewed Gaza campaign, which has killed well over 350 Palestinians, has strengthened Hamas militants, further undermined Abbas's appeals for nonviolence, and provoked threats of renewed terrorism.

A new U.S. policy that integrates peace and reform is needed. First, the United States should call for an urgent mutual ceasefire and a prisoner exchange. Second, it should seek contacts with Hamas to encourage the movement's pragmatic elements. Third, Washington should urge Israel to release Palestinian Authority tax revenues and allow Europeans to resume aid to the Palestinians. Fourth, it should urge Israeli steps to halt unilateral acts and ease onerous conditions of occupation in parallel with Palestinian security reforms. Finally, the United States should present a new vision of peace to Israelis and Palestinians, offering hope for an escape from the current destructive impasse through a practical plan for a two-state peace that would meet the fundamental needs of both parties. Only such steps would allow U.S. efforts to promote Palestinian reform and create a more moderate partner for peace a chance at success.

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