



# COMMENTARY

Center for Strategic and International Studies ■ Washington D.C.

## **Practical Steps Beyond Annapolis**

By Haim Malka, Deputy Director, Middle East Program

November 27, 2007

Israeli and Palestinian leaders seeking to resolve their differences in Annapolis may as well meet on the moon. Beyond the wide gaps on the core issues, the Annapolis framework ignores the harsh reality that Hamas is shut out of the process while poised to violently derail the entire effort. It is based on wishful thinking that so-called moderate Palestinian forces will be strong enough to overpower hardliners and enforce a final agreement. Though it has positive elements, the strategy is likely to fail. But progress is possible, and still within reach. An effort to end hostilities based on a long term cease-fire stands a better chance of success than pushing for a comprehensive agreement that neither side is capable of implementing. The opportunity should be seized while Hamas, and other spoilers, may be willing to stomach such an approach.

Despite low expectations of a breakthrough, a majority of Palestinians and Israelis want to end the daily cycle of violence. Yet they doubt that negotiating a final agreement will get them there. A long-term cease-fire that includes Hamas can create immediate progress without requiring unrealistic concessions on the core issues of Jerusalem and refugees. In the interim, a number of options, including those outlined in the "road map," can be explored, setting the stage for more serious negotiations on final status issues in the future.

A comprehensive agreement remains the ultimate objective, but even the most ardent supporters of a negotiated settlement do not believe Palestinian "moderates" are strong enough to deliver. Nor will they be in the foreseeable future. The moderates have little legitimacy and represent a small clique who feed off the largesse of the international community. Their many foes beyond Hamas, including militias affiliated with Fatah, oppose their penchant for making concessions to please Washington. There are other options.

Israelis care less about who their partner is than the ability to follow through on commitments, especially on security. Polling in recent years consistently demonstrates that Israelis are willing to accept Hamas' role in resolving the conflict, with over half in a recent poll willing to negotiate a cease-fire with Hamas.

There is also evidence that Hamas is willing to engage with Israel and reach a long-term truce. A truce or long-term cease-fire that ushers in a period of stability is crucial for Hamas' attempt to govern. In the past, the Islamic movement enforced its own cease-fire, which even the Israeli military acknowledged was effective. Though it is not about to accept international demands to renounce violence and accept Israel's right to exist, it is again in the movement's interest to reach an accommodation. It should be encouraged to do so.

Though a comprehensive cease-fire stands a greater chance of success than the Annapolis approach, it has its challenges. From an Israeli military perspective, a broad cease-fire remains problematic if Hamas continues to smuggle and produce weapons and rockets. An expanded cease-fire would also presumably limit the Israeli military's operational maneuverability in the Palestinian territories, something it has been reluctant to give up. Perhaps more importantly, the approach will be interpreted as throwing a lifeline to Hamas and forsaking the moderates who seek a nonviolent path to Palestinian statehood.

But negotiations are not a popularity contest. The moderates should not be abandoned, but rather encouraged to work with Hamas before pursuing negotiations with Israel. A truce would lend them more credibility than empty promises on final status issues. The first step should be a resumption of the Palestinian unity government. Prospects have been damaged through Hamas' violent takeover of Gaza, and some continue to question whether it can ever be possible. The current U.S.-led strategy has only deepened the crisis. As long as the international community and what is left of Fatah continue to shut Hamas out of the process, progress is unlikely and the moderates will be incapable of implementing even the most basic agreement with Israel.

The time for reaching a truce is eroding. Hard-liners within Hamas are on the offensive. For the moment, they and other factions are committed to the unity of the movement. But Gaza-based military commanders are increasingly making independent decisions. The kidnapping of Gilad Shalit (still held by Hamas) in the summer of 2006 and the takeover of Gaza in the summer of 2007 raise doubts about the political leadership's ability to rein-in Hamas' hard-liners. Any disintegration of Hamas' decisionmaking structure would be disastrous for the movement. It would also doom any future Israeli-Palestinian negotiation, as hard-liners would have even less incentive to buy into a political process.

Despite frustration with Hamas' takeover of Gaza and growing resentment against it, the movement remains strong. Rather than seek a decisive victory for the moderates, all efforts should focus on pushing Palestinians to work together. De-escalation and a long-term truce would be a significant and tangible gain. It could also eventually set the stage for a more far-reaching agreement. The opportunity is still within reach. It should not be allowed to slip away again.

*The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) is a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions; accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in these publications should be understood to be solely those of the authors.*