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Israel and Hamas: A new equation for Mid-East peace?

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

Israeli and Palestinian hardliners rather than moderates are serving each other's purpose in the Middle East conflict. That is the underlying dynamic of the political calculations of both Israel and Hamas in the recent lop-sided swap of an Israeli soldier for over a thousand Palestinian prisoners.

Commentary

THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN peace process remains frozen with little, if any, prospect of it gaining momentum. President Mahmoud Abbas' effort to achieve United Nations recognition of Palestinian statehood in a bid to break the logjam is mired in diplomatic red tape and likely to be foiled by a United States veto if it comes up for a vote in the Security Council.

True to form, hardliners on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian divide are finding common ground where moderates are grasping for straws. In doing so, they are reaffirming a long-standing fact of life of the Israeli-Palestinian equation: hardliners can serve each other's needs to mutual benefit without making the kind of wrenching concessions that thwart the ambitions of peacemakers and moderates on both sides.

The prisoner swap in which Israel bought freedom for now Staff Sergeant Gilad Shalit after five years in Palestinian captivity in exchange for the release of 1,027 prisoners - many of whom were responsible for deadly attacks on Israelis - is the latest example of sworn enemies finding it easier to do business than those who advocate compromise and living in peace and harmony side by side.

No peace works for all

Underlying, the swap is a belief on the part of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Hamas that there is no realistic chance for an agreement on peace terms that would be acceptable to both Palestinians and Israelis. Given the nature of his coalition government, Netanyahu has so far been unwilling or unable to give Abbas the bare minimum he would need to push forward with peace without at least the tacit backing of Hamas.

While Netanyahu officially refuses to negotiate with Hamas, for its part, Hamas refuses Israeli conditions for its inclusion in a peace process. These are that it recognises Israel's right to exist, abandons its armed struggle and accepts past Israeli-Palestinian agreements. If anything, the fact that it has achieved a tangible victory with the release of prisoners belonging to both Hamas as well as Abbas' Fatah movement has reinforced the Islamist movement's conviction that its hard line is paying off.

Netanyahu has strengthened Hamas in its conviction not only by excluding Abbas from the prisoner swap. He has also done so by undermining the Palestinian president with his decision to build a new Jewish settlement on the southern edge of Jerusalem and granting legal status to settlements established without his government's approval. Abbas has made an Israeli freeze on settlements his core pre-condition for revival of peace talks with the Israelis, to no avail.

Temporary arrangements suit all but Abbas

Unlike Abbas, Netanyahu has made his most hardline critics part of his coalition. Netanyahu and Israel's right-wing moreover agree on fundamentals: a rejection of an Israeli return to the borders prior to the 1967 conquest of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem and a perception of a nuclear-armed Iran as the foremost threat to the existence of the Jewish state. Hamas rather than Abbas offers Netanyahu the space to build Israeli policy on those two principles. Hamas' refusal to meet Israeli conditions for peace negotiations proves the Israeli prime minister's assertion that Israel has no Palestinian partner with which it can do business.

At the same time, Hamas has proven that it can and will make temporary arrangements with Israel like the prisoner swap or a ceasefire that safeguards Israeli towns from Palestinian rocket attacks. Hamas has moreover, contributed its bit to weakening Abbas by effectively thwarting the Palestinian leader's efforts at reconciliation so that Palestinians can confront Israel with a unified front.

The possibility of Hamas' external wing moving its headquarters from Syria, Iran's closest ally in the Arab world, to post-Mubarak Egypt, which facilitated the prisoner swap, further serves Netanyahu's purpose of clearing the deck for possible pre-emptive military action against Iran. Lingering in the background is uncertainty of what Israel's immediate neighbourhood may look like. Syrian president Bashar al-Assad is battling for his survival with no sign of the eight months of mass anti-government protests subsiding despite a brutal crackdown. Jordan's King Abdullah has so far been able to contain demands for political reform and greater economic opportunity.

Israeli military: the joker in the pack

Ironically, Israel's military and former senior Israeli military commanders constitute the greatest threat to Netanyahu's policy designs and may offer Hamas its best chance yet of becoming a player in peace talks with Israel as well as the dominant force in Palestinian politics. While Israel's military appears split on the prospect of a pre-emptive strike against Iran, at least half of the retired leaders of Israel's military and intelligence services have publicly rejected Netanyahu's strategic thinking.

Perhaps, most vocal among them is Meir Dagan, a former head of Mossad, who has not only criticised Netanyahu's hard line toward Iran but also called for Israeli acceptance of a nine-year old Saudi peace plan endorsed by all Arab states. That peace plan offers Israel full diplomatic relations in exchange for a complete withdrawal from Palestinian lands occupied in 1967.

No doubt Dagan, Hamas' nemesis who is credited with the death of hundreds of its operatives, has political ambitions as well as the military credentials that Netanyahu lacks. His willingness to entertain the Saudi proposal would open the door to Hamas to take its seat at the table. That could well lead to a new chapter in Israeli-Palestinian relations.

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