



A Conflicts Forum Monograph

“Follow Us Not Them”

**The Ramallah Model:
Washington’s Palestinian
Failure**

By Geoffrey Aronson

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Précis: George Bush's "vision" of a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is based on the supremacy of the "Ramallah model" over the "Gaza model." U.S. policy intends that the advantages championed by Ramallah in negotiations with Israel and the economic revival enabled by international assistance will "strengthen Abu Mazen" and undermine the Palestinian majority for Hamas. In this contest, however, Hamas, from its base in Gaza, retains significant advantages. As long as the limitations of U.S. policy prevent an end to occupation, the Ramallah model will be compromised and the process of "strengthening Abu Mazen" will continue the process of Fateh's marginalization and Hamas's empowerment that has been the legacy of the Oslo era.

On June 24, 2002 U.S. President George W. Bush gave what has come to be called "The Vision Speech." In his short Rose Garden address, the president offered his conditional support for a Palestinian state "whose borders and certain aspects of its sovereignty will be provisional until resolved as part of a final settlement in the Middle East." Significantly, the White House highlighted Bush's remarks as a "call for [a] new Palestinian leadership" rather than as an unprecedented pledge of American support for Palestinian statehood. It was only later that Bush featured his claim as "the first American President to call for the creation of a Palestinian state."² President Bush offered a lengthy and detailed prescription, and a promise of Washington's support, for a wholesale transformation of Palestinian institutions and politics created under the aegis of PLO chairman and Palestinian Authority president Yasser Arafat, as necessary prerequisites to US political support for statehood.

My vision is two states, living side by side in peace and security. There is simply no way to achieve that peace until all parties fight terror. ... Peace requires a new and different Palestinian leadership, so that a Palestinian state can be born. ... I call on the Palestinian people to elect new leaders,

¹ U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Interview with the *New York Daily News*, July 2, 2007.

² "President Calls for New Palestinian Leadership," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, June 24, 2002.

leaders not compromised by terror. I call upon them to build a practicing democracy, based on tolerance and liberty. If the Palestinian people actively pursue these goals, America and the world will actively support their efforts. If the Palestinian people meet these goals, they will be able to reach agreement with Israel and Egypt and Jordan on security and other arrangements for independence.

And when the Palestinian people have new leaders, new institutions and new security arrangements with their neighbors, the United States of America will support the creation of a Palestinian state whose borders and certain aspects of its sovereignty will be provisional until resolved as part of a final settlement in the Middle East ...

And the United States will not support the establishment of a Palestinian state until its leaders engage in a sustained fight against the terrorists and dismantle their infrastructure. This will require an externally supervised effort to rebuild and reform the Palestinian security services. The security system must have clear lines of authority and accountability and a unified chain of command ...

If Palestinians embrace democracy, confront corruption and firmly reject terror, they can count on American support for the creation of a provisional state of Palestine. ... As new Palestinian institutions and new leaders emerge, demonstrating real performance on security and reform, I expect Israel to respond and work toward a final status agreement. With intensive efforts by all, this agreement could be reached within three years from now. And I and my country will actively lead toward that goal. ... If liberty can blossom in the rocky soil of the West Bank and Gaza, it will inspire millions of men and women around the globe who are equally weary of poverty and oppression, equally entitled to the benefits of democratic government.³

Not for the last time, Bush chose a moment when Palestinian independence appeared further out of reach than ever to announce his support for it. Indeed, the Bush "vision speech" was less a path-breaking declaration of U.S. support for an end to Israel's occupation than a presidential effort at damage control -- a declaration of total estrangement from the model of Palestinian rule created by Yasser Arafat, with substantial U.S., international and Israeli support during the Oslo era -- and a platform for establishing an extraordinary standard for a renewed American partnership with Palestinians. In December 2001, the Israeli cabinet had redefined the Palestinian Authority (PA) as "an entity that supports terror." Then, just two months before Bush's speech, Israel, under the leadership of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, had commenced a direct military reoccupation of the West Bank, ending the security partnership upon which the Oslo process had

³ Ibid.

been based. Operation Defensive Shield redrew the Oslo-era map of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, presaging a new and still-relevant post-Oslo model, defined by the destruction of the nascent institutions of Palestinian self-rule, the evisceration of already limited Palestinian security capabilities, draconian restrictions on Palestinian movement and economic life, and settlement expansion in the West Bank -- and by the creation of a new strategic paradigm ("disengagement"), in the Gaza Strip.

The White House no doubt was determined to cut its losses with Arafat, much as Israel had done. The vision speech was an American declaration that the U.S.-Palestinian partnership too was ended. Bush, following both Sharon and his predecessor Prime Minister Ehud Barak (who, in the wake of the stillborn Camp David talks in July 2000, promoted his "no partner" thesis), added his voice to the chorus working for an end to Arafat's rule and the institutions created in his image. The vision speech also established U.S. support for a new Israeli model of continuing occupation that distanced Palestinian statehood from the diplomatic agenda, and dictated the all but impossible role that a Palestinian partner was expected to play in the new model. In July 2002, the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) was an unarticulated subtext of the vision speech, but Hamas -- as an identifiable antagonist -- did not merit Bush's specific mention. The decisive context that Bush constructed in 2002 was between Arafat's "terror" and Palestinian democracy. Hamas was an important but clearly secondary player.

I. - The Failure of Oslo and the Rise of Hamas

The scene was much changed when, in 2007, high-level US attention once again focused on Palestine. But the five-year anniversary of Bush's vision speech was notable more for the failure of U.S. policies during the period than its successes. Palestinians, now under the leadership of Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), were in more perilous shape than ever.⁴ There were new, democratically elected Palestinian leaders, but no new Palestinian institutions. Arafat was gone, but tens of PA legislators associated with Hamas languished in Israeli prisons. The governing branches of the PA were all but virtual -- particularly core legislative, security, and police institutions. The Palestinian economy was in a shambles, its decline chronicled by regular reports from the World Bank and others -- a consequence of Israel's expansive security requirements. Palestinian misery proceeded in tandem with continuing Israeli efforts to "claim space" in the West Bank as new and existing settlements expanded, the separation barrier arose, and separate transport networks aimed at further separating Israelis and Palestinians were constructed. In Gaza, Israel's policy of estrangement progressed, unhindered

⁴ Fateh, reported Israeli correspondent Roni Shaked in a typical example, "no longer operates as a cohesive organization with a hierarchical structure in the West Bank," *Yediot Aharonot*, October 25, 2007.

by half-hearted U.S. initiatives, most visibly in the stillborn November 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access.

Abu Mazen, warmly described by the Bush as "a president committed to peace,"⁵ had triumphed in elections for the presidency deemed free and fair by Western observers, but so too had the Reform and Change (Hamas) list in parliamentary elections held in January 2006. Fateh -- the Palestinian embodiment of a secular Arab nationalist movement that defined not only Palestinian but Arab politics for 85 years -- was now led by Abu Mazen and a sclerotic and discredited Fateh leadership, which was set adrift by their failure to gain independence and end occupation, as well as by Israel's decision to turn away from them as partners in realizing an agreed upon future for the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Fateh leaders were caught in a dilemma of their own making; they were weakened both by their inability to satisfy the demands of their own people for independence as well as by the requirements established by stronger powers.

The Oslo process was aimed at the empowerment of secular Palestinian nationalists led by Fateh and the destruction of Hamas, which was a movement described by Bush as "[more] devoted to extremism and murder than to serving the Palestinian people." Even so, by July of 2007 it was hard not to conclude that the diplomacy championed by successive U.S. administrations, both before and after Bush's 2002 speech, had produced the exact opposite: Hamas was empowered, both at the ballot box and on the battlefield. The Fateh-dominated security infrastructure in Gaza had crumbled in the face of an ascendant Hamas and, in the West Bank, Fateh and the PA were on political and economic life support. Perhaps such a depressing accounting of the failure of the assumptions and practices of Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy might have sparked a policy review similar to the "lessons learned" exercises undertaken by senior military officers after military engagements. But the president's July 15, 2007 speech gave no evidence of any stock-taking whatsoever.

At the very moment when Abu Mazen had lost half of his nominal kingdom; when Hamas and Fateh were engaged in a what one Fateh official described as "a struggle for our existence," and Israel was faced with a security challenge from Gaza the likes of which it had not witnessed in decades; that is: at a moment when the dramatic consequences of the failure of Bush's lackluster effort to end occupation were never more apparent (and when George Bush had himself warned that a diplomatic failure endangered the very notion of a two state solution), the president (as he had done in 2002), announced a new initiative. This announcement, like Bush's vision speech, was an effort at damage control, sparked yet again by the failures of the Fateh model on the Palestinian stage. The president called for an "international meeting" before the end of 2007 to restore the fortunes of Abu Mazen and the forces nominally under his command.

⁵ "President Bush Discusses the Middle East, The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, July 15, 2007.

There was no nuance in Bush's analysis. A simplistic framework, seductively mathematic in its precision, lies at the center of Bush's 2007 reaffirmation of the model for Palestinian behavior inaugurated in 2002. The objective shared by all of good will is "two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security." Palestinians led by Abu Mazen are at the center of this side of the Bush equation, alongside the Arab supporters of the "plan that recognizes Israel's place in the Middle East" together with "most of the international community." On the other side stands Hamas, "opposed to peace," "extremist, [and whose actions have] betrayed the Palestinian people," and by an extension of the Bush logic, Iran and Syria.

Even more than in 2002 when the vision speech debuted, the Palestinians remain divided against themselves. If they can only manage to remake themselves according to the prescription Bush is offering, the White House seems to be saying, the gates of heaven will open to them. As Bush promised in June 2002, "if all parties will break with the past and set out on a new path, we can overcome the darkness with the light of hope. Peace requires a new and different Palestinian leadership, so that a Palestinian state can be born."

This is a moment of clarity for all Palestinians, and now comes a moment of choice. The alternatives before the Palestinian people are stark. There is the vision of Hamas, which the world saw in Gaza -- with murderers in black masks, and summary executions, and men thrown to their death from rooftops. By following this path, the Palestinian people would guarantee chaos, and suffering, and the endless perpetuation of grievance. They would surrender their future to Hamas's foreign sponsors in Syria and Iran. And they would crush the possibility of a Palestinian state.

There's another option, and that's a hopeful option. It is the vision of President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayad; it's the vision of their government; it's the vision of a peaceful state called Palestine as a homeland for the Palestinian people. To realize this vision, these leaders are striving to build the institutions of a modern democracy. They're working to strengthen the Palestinian security services, so they can confront the terrorists and protect the innocent. They're acting to set up competent ministries that deliver services without corruption. They're taking steps to improve the economy and unleash the natural enterprise of the Palestinian people. And they're ensuring that Palestinian society operates under the rule of law. By following this path, Palestinians can reclaim their dignity and their future -- and establish a state of their own.⁶

In July 2007, however, there was one significant difference from 2002. A formidable Palestinian challenge to Fateh's preeminence had arisen, exploiting

⁶ "President Calls for New Palestinian Leadership," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, June 24, 2007.

the shortcomings of the Oslo process and the failed partnership between Fateh and Israel. The new model, empowered by the Oslo and disengagement models, now ruled in the Gaza Strip, where Hamas was consolidating power and competing for Palestinian, Arab, and Islamic attention and support. Bush's July 2007 speech was animated by this new challenge. Indeed absent the crisis sparked by the decimation of Fateh's presence in Gaza during the confrontation with Hamas forces in June -- and the unprecedented threat posed to the model of partnership dictated by Israel and the U.S. -- it may not have occurred at all. President Bush has framed a clear choice for Palestinians. On the one hand is the Gaza model -- organized on a basis at odds with Washington's preferences and in the Bush worldview a beacon for all that is wrong with the world today. To choose Hamas, Bush promises, will guarantee continuing occupation and statelessness. The preferred option is the Ramallah model, the path of Abu Mazen and Salam Fayad, the path of renewed partnership with Israel and Washington that might, just well might, lead to Bush's ill-defined vision of Palestinian statehood.

II. - Reviving the "Diplomacy of Failure"

Bush has been partial to "performance-based" diplomacy, which features prominently in both the Roadmap and in the vision speech. This conceptual focus on the formulaic unfolding of diplomacy also informs his new Ramallah model and provides a contrast to the classic, more brutal examples of state building like those now evolving in Gaza. All but eclipsed by the broad shadow of Hamas's consolidation of power in Gaza, Bush declared that "[by] supporting the reforms of President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayad, we can help them show the world what a Palestinian state would look like -- and act like. We can help them prove to the world, the region, and Israel that a Palestinian state would be a partner -- not a danger. We can help them make clear to all Palestinians that rejecting violence is the surest path to security and a better life. And we can help them demonstrate to the extremists once and for all that terror will have no place in a Palestinian state."⁷

Bush's support for a domesticated and well-behaved Palestinian pursuit of sovereignty and independence has a long, if undistinguished lineage. In fact, diplomacy based upon these presumptions has an unblemished record of failure during the last sixteen years of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. During the 1992-2002 period Israel was never impressed enough with the Palestinian partnership at the heart of the Oslo process to withdraw its troops or settlers from the West Bank. Diplomatic and governing frameworks failed to win Palestinian sovereignty or an end to occupation, but rather the opposite. Successive diplomatic and governing frameworks put forward by various parties have, instead, undermined

⁷ "President Calls for New Palestinian Leadership," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, June 24, 2002.

Israeli confidence in Palestinian institutions and created unprecedented popular Palestinian support for Hamas, establishing for the latter a critical territorial base unencumbered by direct Israeli rule.

Indeed, when Ariel Sharon embarked on a course of territorial retreat – the key element of any framework for Palestinian independence – his decision to withdraw settlers and permanently stationed forces from the Gaza Strip -- owed nothing whatsoever to the success of either the Oslo model or the model championed by Bush in 2002, but rather to their failure. Disengagement from Gaza and the pattern of relations now being sketched between Hamas and Israel (not just in and around Gaza, but also in the West Bank) is not the product of an amicable partnership between Israel and Fateh that is at the heart of Bush's vision and the model of rewards for good behavior that he intends to instill in Ramallah. Rather, Israel's unprecedented departure from Gaza and the removal of all settlers and permanently stationed troops was the product of blood and fire, and unarticulated but nonetheless effective understandings between Israel and Hamas, a dynamic that continues to define relations between them today and, more than ever, threatens the relevance of the Ramallah model that Bush champions. Both of these elements are rooted in the failure of the Ramallah model, not its success. Notwithstanding Gaza's innumerable difficulties (and Hamas's Islamist orientation), one need only imagine the prospects of a Ramallah model under Abu Mazen's leadership to get a sense of the scale of the challenge posed by what happened in Gaza. It is no wonder that Abu Mazen's plaintive demands for an end to occupation echo silently in the ears of U.S. and Israeli leaders. The limited horizons declared by Israel and American champions of the Ramallah model do not begin to contest the elementary territorial advantages of the Gaza model created by disengagement, even as they ignore the fact that the core contest today between Israel and the Palestinians is the one being waged between Israel and Hamas.

The burden of choice between the Ramallah and Gaza models is on the Palestinians, Bush explained in July 2007, but "all responsible nations have a duty to help clarify the way forward." Bush has made it clear that the responsibility for the success of the Ramallah model rests also on the shoulders of the international community, which he expects will do its part to make Ramallah whole, and to actively support keeping Gaza in penury. Interestingly, the basic context in which this drama is being played out — i.e. the occupation – is almost entirely absent from Bush's argument. One looks in vain for sustained American recognition that continuing occupation and settlement is a function of the zero sum contest between Israelis and Palestinians to control territory that, more than anything, defines the context in which the Ramallah-Gaza dynamic was created, and will be resolved. This is not to suggest that Bush does not realize that Israel has responsibilities. But unlike the unequivocal, wholesale and dramatic demands for change directed at Palestinians, if the Ramallah model is to prevail, those placed upon Israel are limited, conditional, and tentative. This distinction is clearly evident in the manner in which the president framed his expectations of each

party.

[T]he Palestinian people must decide that they want a future of decency and hope -- not a future of terror and death. They must match their words denouncing terror with action to combat terror. The Palestinian government must arrest terrorists, dismantle their infrastructure, and confiscate illegal weapons -- as the road map requires. They must work to stop attacks on Israel, and to free the Israeli soldier held hostage by extremists. And they must enforce the law without corruption, so they can earn the trust of their people, and of the world. Taking these steps will enable the Palestinians to have a state of their own. And there's only way to end the conflict, and nothing less is acceptable.

Israel has a clear path. Prime Minister Olmert must continue to release Palestinian tax revenues to the government of Prime Minister Fayad. . . . [U]nauthorized outposts should be removed and settlement expansion ended. At the same time, Israelis should find other practical ways to reduce their footprint without reducing their security -- so they can help President Abbas improve economic and humanitarian conditions.⁸
[Author's emphasis]

III. - *Must vs. Should in the Ramallah Model*

The significance of these linguistic distinctions should not be underestimated. Washington can command Ramallah to conform to an agenda established for it. Israel, in contrast, can merely be advised. There are three elements to Washington's rehabilitation of the Ramallah model and the policy of "strengthening Abu Mazen." The first noted by Bush, and therefore one assumes the most important, is financial -- humanitarian aid, security assistance, and lending to the business community. The second element is diplomatic. The U.S., it seems, is no longer wedded to the notion at the center of the Road Map, that discussion of a "political horizon" must await more mundane, operational "performance-based" improvements. Taking no heed of the challenge posed by the Gaza model -- a territory without Israeli soldiers and settlers, territorially contiguous and without checkpoints -- the Bush White House has down-sized the notion of a political horizon to which Ramallah can aspire, which is now self-consciously limited to "increasing the confidence of all parties in a two state solution" rather to defining its content, let alone securing its implementation. The third element comes under the rubric of "security sector reform," which is aimed at reestablishing the Israeli-Palestinian security partnership against Palestinian dead enders and improving the quality of civil policing in Palestinian

⁸ "President Bush Discusses the Middle East, The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, July 15, 2007.

communities wracked by lawlessness.

If this recipe is followed, Bush (in contrast to the alchemists of yore), does not promise to turn lead into gold, i.e. occupation into sovereignty -- he simply holds out hope that in exchange for "an end to terrorism" and the building of "Palestinian democratic institutions" Israel should then be persuaded to enter into serious negotiations. More specifically, Bush notes that only after Palestinians create "functioning political institutions and capable security forces, and leaders who reject terror and violence" will "serious negotiations towards the creation of a Palestinian state" begin. That is, perform as you are commanded and be rewarded with a process that, if successful, will define the terms of Palestinian statehood. This prescription suggests more unanswerable questions than concrete answers. Who, for example, will determine when Palestinian security forces have met the test of competence? And what is the basis upon which this will be determined? Even so, there is an overarching concern raised by this formula. If, in a dramatic contrast to previous experience, Palestinians -- while still under occupation -- achieve the feats of organization, governance, and security control Bush has set for them, what incentive will remain for Israel to end the occupation?

Even as Hamas in Gaza busies itself with the elementary tasks of sovereignty -- battling external enemies and establishing its power internally -- it is clear that Bush envisions traveling a very long road before the creation of a Palestinian state under the Ramallah model. This process is intended to strengthen Abu Mazen in two respects. First and foremost against Hamas and the Islamist movement in general. Second, against Israel, which will be convinced to grant to Palestinians in the future what today it refuses, as a consequence of Israeli-defined Palestinian achievements in governance and security. President Bush has endorsed three principles governing what used to be called the "final status" agreement that will then come into reach: Israeli security; a viable and contiguous Palestinian state; and "a territorial settlement, with mutually agreed borders reflecting previous lines and current realities, and mutually agreed adjustments." Will the legacy of ineffectiveness, enfeeblement and growing powerlessness that has long been the fate of the Ramallah model be reversed by this process? Will Hamas in Gaza be terminally weakened by the elusive prospect of talks on Palestinian statehood? The record of the last two decades is a sobering one. The Ramallah model has been progressively weakened and its popular attractiveness reduced, while the Gaza model has been strengthened by the assumptions that have guided diplomats since 1991. What, if anything, has changed to suggest that the current contest, as framed by George Bush, has any chance whatsoever of reversing this dynamic?

IV. - Israel and the Limits of the Ramallah Model

As always, any discussion about the conditions governing Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy must begin with Israel. The parameters of the American-led campaign to strengthen Abu Mazen will be defined by Israel. There is no suggestion in Bush's vision that this fundamental aspect guiding U.S. policy has changed. What is Israel's view of Abu Mazen, the movement he leads, and the model advanced by the Bush administration? What evidence is there of Israel's interest in a strong Palestinian partner? What indeed is Israel prepared to do to strengthen the Ramallah model?

In affairs of state there is scant room for sentimentality. Ariel Sharon once famously dismissed Abu Mazen as a "chick without feathers." Israel's leadership today is more charitable towards the beleaguered Palestinian president, if no less circumspect about his authority. "Palestinian society suffers from fragmentation," writes one Israeli journalist close to Israeli official and intelligence circles. "Gaza is separate from the West Bank geographically, demographically, and ideologically. The economy is in a catastrophic state, Gazan's are going hungry, authority has all but collapsed, and so has civil society. Abbas and Fayad are isolated from their people, their only function is to pay government salaries. The only areas under Abbas' control are his Ramallah headquarters and Jericho. The West Bank would undoubtedly fall to Hamas should Israel withdraw."⁹

This hard-headed view of Ramallah's predicament is not viewed by Israelis as a crisis. "A period of relative calm has descended upon the country of late," writes Nahman Shai, a former IDF spokesman whose soothing commentaries during the first Gulf war calmed the nation. Measures taken by Israel during the intifada -- the construction of the separation barrier, the reoccupation of Areas A, the closure regime, the estrangement of Gaza -- all of these have removed Palestinians from Israel's gaze. Israeli politicians are not in a hurry to upset what is to them a comfortable situation. Abu's Mazen's tenuous position is understood as an Israeli advantage. Defense Minister Barak has told top Palestinian officials that his preference is to "freeze" the current situation in the West Bank regarding closure and IDF deployment. His complacency is far removed from the urgency to rehabilitate the Ramallah model and it is shared by a broad Israeli constituency. Abu Mazen's credentials as a man of peace and his internal troubles are similarly viewed by Israelis as a reason not to address his core grievances: "There is little doubt that the current Palestinian leadership is the easiest that Israel has had to deal with as a partner in dialogue," Dov Weisglas, Sharon's diplomatic confidant and troubleshooter, wrote in *Yediot Aharonot*. "The splitting of the Palestinian Authority -- making Gaza and the West Bank into two de facto separate countries -- is a positive development in this context." The qualities that in Weisglas's view

⁹ Roni Shaked, as quoted in *al-Ayyam*, October 17, 2007.

make Abu Mazen "easy" to deal with preclude the kind of agreement that might reverse his growing weakness and isolation. Yet they also argue in favor of an Israeli policy that stops short of fatally undermining him. The preservation of these advantages, from Israel's viewpoint, also limit its interest in revising existing policy. After all, if your adversary is already tamed, why bother to make changes that not only may harm you, but may also empower him? As Ehud Barak observed: "The joint declaration with the Palestinians (for Annapolis) must be meaty enough so that the Palestinians don't feel neglected or humiliated and general enough so that Israelis don't feel like suckers who made critical concessions on central issues and received nothing in return."¹⁰

There is also a far harder-edged, less nuanced Israeli view of the Palestinian president. He is adjudged to be a weak leader who has suffered the loss of one-half of his kingdom, whose soldiers are not prepared to die in his defense, who is at war with the majority party, and who looks to outsiders (notably including his existential adversary), for critical support and assistance in creating a controversial diplomatic collaboration. "President Mahmoud Abbas, currently Israel's only interlocutor, can neither make concessions in anyone else's name nor coerce anyone," notes Gen. (Res.) Ya'acov Amidror, the chief of research and the intelligence assistant to the Minister of Defense Commander of the National Defense College. "Indeed the day the IDF loses its grip on the West Bank, we will witness the countdown there toward a takeover by Hamas. These are the basic and important facts of life that will determine the nature of Israel's relationship with the Palestinians." In short, Abu Mazen may well be a nice man, but he is not a man Israel need respect, let alone fear, and he is certainly not someone who can force a material change in its policy – a judgment little different from Sharon's unforgiving assessment. Nevertheless he should not be forced to fail.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is applauded by Bush administration as someone who, like Sharon, has been won over to the view that the Ramallah model needs to be nurtured by an Israeli government guided by an enlightened sense of self-interest. Olmert, in Bush's words, rejects "continuing occupation of the West Bank" in favor of "developing areas like the Negev and the Galilee." Washington's view reflects a fundamental misreading on two counts. Sharon, whatever his interest in developing the Galilee and Negev, was determined to crush, divide, and tame the Palestinian national movement, and to encourage West Bank settlement as a means of preserving Israel's military control there. Olmert, to use Barak's derisive term, is no "sucker." As artfully explained by Aluf Benn, *Ha'aretz's* diplomatic correspondent: "Olmert is saying the following: I am responding to international expectations and talking to Mahmoud Abbas, although it is clear to me and to him that the situation on the ground will not change as a result of these talks. If I present a 'diplomatic horizon' to the Fateh leaders, they

¹⁰ *Ha'aretz*, September 21, 2007.

may have a chance of surviving on the West Bank. And even if they fall and Hamas takes control of Ramallah, Nablus and Hebron, Israel will not be to blame. Meanwhile, we must not rush with negotiations, and implementation must be postponed, so that my coalition will not fall apart and my government will have an agenda."¹¹ Israel's leadership may have accepted the principle of two states (as one former intelligence official who regularly briefs top officials says), but they have not internalized the price.

In sum, the U.S. may well be focused on creating an acceptable Palestinian model as a prelude to ending occupation and Israel may well be prepared to follow this road, if only because it precludes other more effective and insistent demands for a change in its policies. But after a century of struggling to weaken the Palestinian national movement, there is no reason to believe that Israel will willingly lend its hand to the creation of a Palestinian political leadership capable of reducing Israeli power.

V. - Washington's Skewed Prism

The prism through which Israel views its relationship with Palestinians is different than that which animates Washington, and it undermines the very idea of a working Ramallah model that informs American policy. As President Shimon Peres recently explained: "There is a competition here over staying power, not just over ability to withstand suffering."¹² Significantly, Peres was referring to the conflict with Hamas in Gaza – the focal point of an ongoing contest between Israel and the Palestinians in which Abu Mazen and the Ramallah model have almost ceased to register. In an address on November 3, 2007, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni -- who in internal deliberations once described Abu Mazen as "doomed" -- framed the rationale for making limited adjustments to Israel's conduct of the occupation the centerpiece of the effort to establish the attraction of the Ramallah model. "The situation today," she noted, "is more complex than ever; we must recognize the reality on the ground. The bad news is -- terrorism rules in Gaza. Hamas took advantage of the democratic process and is arming itself from the Philadelphi Corridor, while Israel is under attack daily. The good news is -- there is a moderate Palestinian leadership that accepts the idea of peace, the vision of two states living in peace and security." Livni then went on to note: "Today, the Palestinians understand that terrorism harms their own interests. At the same time, there are problems with implementing the vision, given the current situation. There are problems with their ability to deliver, and we must strengthen the moderate leadership in order to improve the situation on the ground - not only in the Gaza Strip but also in the West Bank. That is the reality."

¹¹ Aluf Benn, *Ha'aretz*, October 25, 2007.

¹² *Ha'aretz*, September 14, 2007.

Ramallah has been clear, if not effective, in its demand to put an end to occupation as the operational objective at the heart of the campaign to strengthen its fortunes. But the remedies acceptable to Israel are far more modest. There are promises of a limited improvement in the PA's financial resources; minor changes, described by one former top defense ministry official as no more than "moving a few piles of stones" in the system of checkpoints and barriers at the heart of the post-Oslo security regime; prisoner releases; and renewed, if limited operations by Palestinian security forces, primarily in the realm of civil policing. These improvements in the status quo are viewed by Israel as sufficient to keep the Ramallah model just on the right side of functionality. Most Palestinians, however, disagree. "The assumption that some drip-drop elements that the Olmert government may offer to the Palestinians are an alternative to political progress in negotiations over fundamental issues is naive," explained Nabil Amr', a prominent Fateh leader. "It will only stoke the flames that are hidden under the ashes, or are apparent on the surface." In other words, warns this self-described "member of the army of moderates," the instruments employed by the process championed by Washington will harm the prospects of the Ramallah model rather than help it. This too is the legacy of a generation of American and Israeli policymaking -- policies that have been aimed at strengthening the "good guys" have in practice weakened and undermined them. "The more [Israelis] say that they want to strengthen Fateh," observed the wife of Marwan Barghouti, "the more the people look down on it."¹³

Significant changes in the deployment of the IDF, viewed by many as a key element in strengthening not only Ramallah's security and policing capabilities, but also reversing the catastrophic decline in the Palestinian economy, are opposed by Israel on two counts. First, because Palestinians, even as "partners," cannot under any circumstances be permitted to determine the diplomatic or operational agenda; and, second, because Israel believes that any material loosening of the checkpoint system will merely hasten the day when Hamas rules not only in Gaza but in the West Bank as well. The view that Abu Mazen (and the Ramallah model that he represents), are in fact protected by and dependent for their political survival on the existing draconian IDF closure regime is a common, indeed a majority view in Israel's establishment today, and the view conditions the limited and largely cosmetic albeit necessary changes in the security regime Israel is prepared to undertake.

The U.S. model does not include -- and Israel is not prepared -- to establish the Palestinian Authority as the sole and unchallenged security address in the West Bank. And yet, that is the only standard with a chance of eclipsing Hamas's emerging "one gun, one authority" status in Gaza. Indeed, to even suggest that Abu Mazen need be invested by Israel with such a status in the West Bank betrays the very possibility of it occurring. Security primacy is a product of the balance of forces, not an expression of enlightened self-interest. Such is the model in Gaza,

¹³ Quoted in *Time* magazine, as reported in *Meretz USA News Update*, July 20, 2007.

where Hamas prevailed over Fateh-dominated security forces and is now establishing itself internally against those who oppose any compromise and externally with Israel and Egypt as the responsible address. Even before Fateh's rout in Gaza, Secretary Rice herself acknowledged this: "... it has been very interesting to see Hamas trying to come to terms with no longer being, really a resistance movement, but having to deal with politics."¹⁴

Israel's lack of interest in empowering the Ramallah model is also reflected in the tentative nature of the measures Israel is prepared to consider to loosen the closure regime in place since April 2002. As noted, Israel views Abu Mazen as the prime beneficiary of the draconian regime. Its original and still central objective, however, remains the protection of Israelis, particularly an expanding West Bank settler presence that now numbers more than one quarter of a million.¹⁵ Without a dramatic reversal of the closure regime, the economic rehabilitation of the West Bank will remain a cruel fantasy. In its absence, promises and even the delivery of unprecedented amounts of international aid (like the other features of the program to strengthen Abu Mazen), will serve only to highlight its weaknesses rather than underline its strengths. Here, in the economic realm however, there may be some advantage to be gained over the model unfolding in Gaza. But the economic contest between Gaza and Ramallah is a race to the bottom, and, except for the most cynical, hardly one upon which to construct an attractive model.

The one significant change in Israel's policy since the Bush initiative announced in July was directed against the Gaza Strip, which in September this year was declared a "hostile entity." The daily armed engagements by Palestinian fighters within Gaza and along the border with Israeli forces precipitated an unprecedented decision by Israel's cabinet: "One thing must be handed to the terrorists in the Gaza Strip," wrote Moshe Arens, a former defense minister. "Using primitive, cheap rockets they have forced the Israeli defense ministry to allocate billions to the development of a system that may or may not be the answer to the Qassam rockets."¹⁶

In the aftermath of Hamas' military takeover of Gaza in June 2007, for the first time in the history of the Israel-Palestinian conflict a paradigm of conflict that includes sustained engagement between regular armed forces has been created. In and around Gaza, the IDF and Palestinian forces under Hamas' military command regularly engage in combat. Israel has been compelled to view Hamas in Gaza as a (relatively speaking) strong power and it is taking unprecedented measures to weaken its hold on Gaza's 1.5 million beleaguered residents.

¹⁴ Interview with the *New York Daily News*, June 8, 2007

¹⁵ West Bank settlers today number 265,000, not including 185,000 in East Jerusalem.

¹⁶ *Ha'aretz*, October 30, 2007.

If Israel treats Gaza as the enemy, then is Ramallah considered a "friend?" Does Abu Mazen, as president of the Palestinian Authority, benefit from his partnership with Israel while half of his nominal kingdom is declared an enemy? And if he is a friend, asked one Palestinian commentator writing in the pro-government *Al Ayyam*, "what were the Israeli tanks doing at the refugee camps in Nablus and Jenin and elsewhere in the West Bank, which is suffocated by more than 500 military barriers."¹⁷ The Israeli decision to declare Gaza an "enemy entity" "embarrasses Abu Mazen," explained an aide to a top Palestinian security official. "Israel doesn't care at all about the effect [of the declaration] on Abu Mazen. They are pulling the carpet from under his feet." Secretary Rice was oblivious to this context when asked about the Israeli decision. She declared on September 12, 2007: " Hamas is indeed a hostile entity; and a hostile entity to the U.S. as well." No doubt she thought that her remarks would strengthen Abu Mazen. While there is no evidence that the effect of such a decision on Abu Mazen was decisive in Israeli policy deliberations, it is doubtful the decision was taken as part of the effort to strengthen Abu Mazen, or to facilitate American efforts to do so. The new policy was pointedly declared on the eve of the arrival in Israel of the U.S. secretary of state, and it posed an interesting counterpoint to the model that she has adopted -- even if she did not realize it.

VI. - Weak and Weaker

The dilemma posed to Israel by Hamas's consolidation of power in Gaza has prompted a debate on how best to deal with this new reality. Israel ignores at its peril the creation of an effective and organized military force along a shared border. To the extent that Israel, and along with it, the international community, are forced to address the Gaza model, the prospects for the victory of the Ramallah model are compromised.

The situation now evolving in the contest between Israel and the Palestinians and the derivative one between Gaza and Ramallah, is unlike the one envisioned by President Bush. Here the choice between strength (Ramallah) and weakness (Gaza), good (Ramallah) and bad (Gaza) is clear and unambiguous. The essential advantage Ramallah is said to enjoy – its good relationship with Israel and the West – has been a burden rather than a blessing. Ramallah is an object, not an agent of change. In critically important and objective respects the Gaza model is stronger and more attractive as a model for ending occupation. But the attributes that confer authority and power in Gaza – territory, unified control, and an ability to engage on the battlefield – have not conferred strength. The result is not the contest George Bush has framed between a strong model and a weak one, but

¹⁷ A Conference to end the peace process is needed, Mohammed Yaghy, *Al-Ayyam*, September 21, 2007.

rather a model established by Israel between a weak Gaza and an even weaker Ramallah.

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