

Hamas's Ghost in Annapolis

Nov 21, 2007 Álvaro de Vasconcelos

Next week's Middle East conference in Annapolis can succeed only if it ushers in a Palestinian national unity government backed by a strong international military presence. But that is impossible as long as Hamas is excluded.

America's return to the Israeli-Palestinian diplomatic front is a welcome development. One surely that EU diplomacy has sought to bring about. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's efforts to push the peace process forward during her last years in office seem genuine. If they succeed, Rice and the Bush administration will be remembered not just for the endless tragedy of Iraq, but for making a serious contribution to Middle East peace.

But can the Middle East conference set to take place in Annapolis, Maryland succeed? It could if it ushered in a Palestinian national unity government and an agreement to an extended truce backed by a strong international military presence. Unfortunately, that is highly unlikely. A failure to take Palestinian domestic factors sufficiently into account is the root cause for pessimism.

The need to involve all Palestinian forces in any future peace negotiations is one of the key points of consensus that emerged from a recent Euro-American conference organized by the European Union Institute for Security Studies. Hamas must be a part of any lasting solution to the Palestinian issue, not just because it won democratic elections, but also because it controls the Gaza Strip and has real influence in the West Bank. Moreover, while Hamas's long truce with Israel shows that it may be willing to abandon violence given the right amount of persuasion, it can make itself a terrible nuisance if it continues to be excluded.

There is still the remote possibility, however unlikely, that Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas will come to Annapolis with a concrete plan (a divided Jerusalem, a return to the 1967 borders with minor alterations, compensation for refugees), and a calendar to dismantle West Bank settlements. In this case, Abbas would leave Annapolis in a stronger position and thus be better able to negotiate with Hamas to establish a national unity government.

But any strategy that aims to destroy Hamas as a political force, were it feasible, would only aggravate the crisis by transforming Hamas into a cluster of violent armed groups with which dialogue would be almost impossible.

Henry Kissinger recently proposed waiting for so-called "moderate" Arab countries to impose a solution. But that strategy ignores Palestinian and regional realities. Arab state involvement is, of course, essential. But a strategy that aims to isolate Hamas entirely divides the Palestinians, and also poses a serious problem to Arab governments, which face strong domestic opposition from Islamic parties that back Hamas. Saudi Arabia understood this when it promoted the Mecca agreement that ushered in the first Hamas-PLO national unity government.

Supporting another attempt to form such a government, moreover, could gain the backing of the Israeli public. It is worth remembering that public opinion polls in Israel immediately after the 2006 war in Lebanon indicated that 76% of the population supported negotiations with a Palestinian national unity government that included Hamas.

The Annapolis conference could indeed achieve a firm commitment to the future involvement of all major Palestinian political forces in any future peace negotiations, coupled with the recommendation that these should start with an equally firm pledge to abandon violence by all parties to the conflict. This would remove the main obstacle to rebuilding a Palestinian national unity government. Such an arrangement can establish the strong popular legitimacy that the Palestinians will need at the negotiating table in order to make any real compromise.

Ending violence is also important for improving the lives and engendering trust among ordinary Palestinians and Israelis, and ensuring that Israelis and Palestinians alike support the negotiations. The Israeli population is genuinely concerned about security, as are the Palestinians, and the support of Israel's political parties for negotiations depends upon security guarantees. That is why the question of violence is more pressing than that of immediate recognition of the state of Israel, something that Hamas has already done in practice.

International peacekeepers should enforce such a truce. Palestinians have always favored an international military presence, and the Israelis have also moved in that direction, accepting European forces in South Lebanon and in Gaza at the Rafah border with Egypt. Europeans should agree to supply the bulk of such a force.

Indeed, Europeans should continue to play their traditional role, and to talk without ideological blinkers with all those involved in Palestine's tragedy – including Hamas. This is, in fact, what many Americans privately ask Europeans to do. But, if the Annapolis meeting is to re-ignite a successful peace process, EU governments must first develop a common position on this issue.