

Near East Report Interview
With
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Near East Report: What is your opinion of Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas? Do you think he has made much progress in fighting terrorism, reforming Palestinian governmental institutions and cutting down on incitement against Israel?

Michael Herzog: First of all, Mahmoud Abbas is not Yasir Arafat. He is different in many aspects. For one thing, he has been speaking out against the use of terror since the height of the intifada in 2002. And he probably means it, because he believes it is counterproductive to the Palestinian cause.

He has made some progress, but I would say it is little and slow. I think one would have expected more progress, and it's in his own interest to make more progress before Israel disengages from Gaza.

On the security front, he managed to secure a ceasefire with a set of understandings with militant groups. But it is a very fragile one, and, while it is holding out generally speaking, almost every week there are violations and incidents including the firing of Qassam rockets, mortars and so on. It doesn't seem that he is doing enough to consolidate and enforce the ceasefire. At the very same time the militant groups are using the ceasefire to regroup and organize their ranks, test fire new Qassam rockets and so on. The Palestinian Authority is doing very little to stop them from doing that.

In the field of institution building, there is, again, little progress. I think delaying the Palestinian parliamentary elections, which were scheduled for July but have now been delayed toward the end of the year, is the right step on the part of Abbas. But the real question is, to what extent is he capable of reforming both the Fatah movement and the Palestinian Authority so as to be able to score a nice majority in the upcoming Palestinian elections?

Finally, I think he needs to do much more in terms of coordinating the upcoming disengagement with the Israelis so that he will be ready for the time when Israel leaves, and it will be the Palestinian Authority that assumes control of Gaza, not Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other groups.

NER: How do you see Israel's upcoming disengagement unfolding?

MH: This is the \$64,000 question. Is it going to be successful? First of all, most Israelis would define success in the following terms: Does it improve our security situation and our situation as a whole, or does it not? Will it play into the hands of the Palestinian

Authority and Mahmoud Abbas or will it play into the hands of the militants and be regarded as a reward for terror?

I think even though its late, it's not too late to impact the answer to this question. And this again necessitates more action on the part of Mahmoud Abbas in terms of consolidating security, institution building and coordination of the disengagement with, of course, the support of the international community. And Israel also has an interest in supporting that happening. But, again, as I said, it is not too late to impact the answer. We have only two months until Israel starts implementing the disengagement plan, and I would say everybody has to focus now their attention so that it will be successful.

NER: Syria has been test-firing Scud missiles that are perhaps equipped to carry chemical warheads. Why do you think Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, would do something like that even when he is apparently under a lot of international pressure after withdrawing from Lebanon? Do you think it is a challenge to the United States and Israel?

MH: I think it was kind of a message. But I would say that what we have learned about Bashar al-Assad in the five years that he has held the reins of power is that he is very capable of making every possible mistake. I don't think he misses any pitfalls. So here again, under a lot of international pressure, he is trying to send out a message, saying, "Look, here I am; I'm strong, I'm not intimidated," and so on.

NER: Do you think that Syria has really withdrawn from Lebanon or do you think that they are still maintaining control, as some reports indicate?

MH: I think they have definitely withdrawn their military forces. They've withdrawn part of their intelligence operatives from Lebanon – maybe not all of them, but certainly part of them. Syria still maintains a degree of influence over what's going in Lebanon, but certainly not the same overwhelming domination it used to have, not only because it has withdrawn forces from Lebanon, but mainly because there is a huge body of Lebanese that want them out who will expose any manipulation or maneuver on the part of Syria, so that I think it will be much more difficult for them to just simply dictate everything that is going on in Lebanese politics. So, again, they will have influence, but much less than they used to have in the past.

NER: Is there anything the West can do to compel Hizballah to lay down its arms?

MH: There is a lot the West can do short of military force and so on. Basically, my feeling is that there are many Lebanese – perhaps a majority of Lebanese – who would like to see Hizballah disarmed. I don't think the other Lebanese factions – the Christians, the Sunnis, the Druze, and so on – are comfortable with the situation whereby the only armed militia in Lebanon is Hizballah. And if things will ultimately slope into a kind of an internal civil war, or something like that, they certainly wouldn't like to Hizballah as the only armed force. But, again, Lebanese politics are very complicated, and they are

guided by sectarian considerations, so they cannot just go outright and tell Hizballah, “OK, disarm.”

Essentially, Hizballah pursues simultaneously two agendas. One is the domestic Lebanese agenda and the other is the Iranian Islamist agenda. Until now, it was not faced with the need to make a choice between the two. I think the international community and the internal community in Lebanon should actually pressure Hizballah to make such a choice. First of all, the issue of disarmament should be on the agenda – both of the international community and of the national dialogue in Lebanon itself – as required by [U.N. Security Council] Resolution 1559. Secondly, I think there is no reason to allow Hizballah to hold on to their armaments when Israel has been out of Lebanon since 2000. What Hizballah is saying is that they are protecting Lebanon from Israel. Everyone knows this is only an excuse. I think that it should be an issue addressed by the internal dialogue in Lebanon, and the opposition should be energized by such a stand by the international community.

I think that the new Lebanese government that we will see after the elections should be encouraged to strengthen the Lebanese army and send it down south to the area which is under Hizballah’s control so as to deny Hizballah the excuse of their defending southern Lebanon. I could think about several ways of encouraging the Lebanese government to do so. I think the international community should pressure Syria to not allow any further arms shipments to Hizballah either directly from Iran to Lebanon or through Syria itself. I think the Europeans should make clear to Hizballah that they will be on the terror list unless they stop fueling Palestinian terrorism so as to destroy the peace process.

So there are many things that could and should be done. I could elaborate further on this, but I think there are enough measures that could be taken by the international community in order to put the issue higher on the agenda and put the pressure on Hizballah. Now if Hizballah refuses, I think they will lose either way. If they choose the domestic Lebanese agenda, then they will have to restrain themselves and address the issue of disarmament. If they choose the Iranian agenda, then they will be weakened domestically.

NER: Do you think the United States or the international community should deal with groups like Hamas or Hizballah?

MH: No. I don’t think so. It is one thing to say whether or not they should take part in the political process in these countries and something else dealing with them. I don’t think the international community can determine whether or not Hizballah will participate in the elections or whether Hamas will participate in the elections. But what it can do is make clear to the publics what would be the Western positions vis-à-vis these groups. I mean to say, if you want them to participate, OK, it’s your call, but we will have nothing to do with them. I think we should say this before the elections so that those who go to vote will have our positions in their mind when they cast their ballot.

By the way, I would like to add that when I say the international community should have nothing to do with them, I think there should be two principles guiding international

standing vis-à-vis groups like Hamas and Hizballah. We should require them to both address the anti-Semitic, anti-American, anti-Western parts of their ideology and to forswear the use of violence. One is not enough. As long as these groups call for the destruction of Israel, external forces should have nothing to do with them. Secondly, the use of violence. I think you need to keep both of these things in mind. And by the way, if you look at what British Foreign Minister Jack Straw just said this week regarding Hamas, he basically laid down these two principles, even though the British distinguished talking with high-level Hamas people and low-level Hamas people, like local municipal opposition.

NER: Iran is currently locked in negotiations with the three European nations known as the EU-3. The negotiations are seemingly interminable. At what point do you think the West should break off? How much longer do you think diplomacy would be useful as a solution to dealing with Iran?

MH: This relates to the question, on whose side is time when conducting these talks between the EU-3 and Iran? In order to answer this question you have to ask another question, which is: do the Iranians have a parallel, clandestine program? There is no clear answer to this question, but most Western analysts and the intelligence community believe that the Iranians do have a parallel, clandestine program, but it is not a full one. The Iranians are lacking some elements which are part of their overt program which is blocked – some of it – by the freeze that was agreed upon between the Europeans and the Iranians. So I would say when you look at the question I put forward – on whose side is time? – the answer is mixed. It is not clearly on the side of the Iranians or the West, but there are limits to it because first of all we must assume there are many things we don't know about the program. There may be more elements than we know about so we need to assume that they are proceeding, perhaps at a pace faster than what we assume.

Now, getting back to your question. One way that these talks would break is if the Iranians feel persuaded because they are blocked from getting those elements which they don't have in their clandestine program, and they will look for an excuse to break off the talks. In this case I think the Western answer is quite clear and we have seen recently when the Iranians were threatening to break off talks and to resume enriching uranium that we got this letter from the three foreign ministers of the EU-3 and the Iranians backed down.

But if, on the other hand, the progression of the talks plays into Iranian hands, the West should be aware of this and not allow the Iranians to get concessions endlessly and pointlessly. I think what should be done currently is for the United States and the Europeans to reach an agreement on what should be done in the next phase – post the current diplomacy phase – in terms of terrorism containment and view the situation constantly. At a certain point, I think there should be a limit. I don't speak in time terms – what should be the exact timing – but they should set a limit to the current phase. It should not be an endless, pointless phase.

NER: Can you explain how we should view the Shihab-3 missile that Iran has just upgraded and what new capacity does it give the Iranian regime?

MH: The Iranians initially developed the Shihab-3 with a range of 1,300 kilometers. By the way, the original version they got from the North Koreans was with a range of 1,000 kilometers and they extended it to 1,300 kilometers so as to be able to cover Israel, as well. And it was with a fluid propellant. Now they tested a new type, or an improved version, of the Shihab-3 with solid propellant which enabled them to reach a range of 2,000 kilometers – they extended the range. Solid propellant is, I would say, more reliable, allows them to expand the range, but it also allows them less preparation. When you fire a missile and you have solid propellant you need much less preparation to fire it than with fluid propellant. So suddenly this is an improvement in their missile program.

NER: What does that now mean in terms of missile coverage?

MH: They can cover a larger area in Turkey and also in the [Persian] Gulf area – Saudi Arabia and the [Persian] Gulf area. So it's not only Israel. It's Europe on one hand and the Gulf on the other hand.

NER: How do you think a nuclear Iran would change the Middle East?

MH: I see several consequences of the nuclearization of Iran. One is a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. I am quite certain that others in the Middle East will not remain indifferent if Iran goes nuclear. Countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and others, I think, will revisit their current policies on nuclear capabilities once Iran goes nuclear or they are sure Iran is about to become nuclear.

Second, under the cover and the shield of nuclear deterrence, the Iranians could and probably will play a more daring power-projection role vis-à-vis Israel, the [Persian] Gulf, the United States in Iraq. There are many things they could do under the shield of nuclear deterrence. They could affect the oil prices as well if they choose to take steps in the straits of Hormuz [the entrance to the Persian Gulf from the Indian Ocean, through which about a quarter of the world's oil passes.] And I think their conclusion of studying the experience of Saddam Hussein was that, had he waited long enough and reached nuclear capabilities before invading Kuwait, he would probably still be in Kuwait and in power today. Their conclusion was you need to acquire these capabilities and then, under the shield of nuclear deterrence, there is much more that you can do.

Third, I would not rule out that once Iran goes nuclear it will be also a proliferator to certain elements in the Middle East. Of course, Iran would choose carefully, but under certain circumstances it could proliferate to Syria, maybe even Hizballah.

And fourth, there is an open question: what would nuclear weapons do in terms of prolonging the life of the regime in Tehran. I believe that this regime is highly unpopular within Iran. It may take a long time to see regime change, but once they hold the nuclear power it may prolong the regime's domestic life.

NER: So national pride is not the most important priority for Iranians? They would rather have regime change over gaining nuclear capabilities?

MH: Surely, it's an issue of national pride, but I think Iranians would prefer to get rid of their regime. That goal goes before their national pride in terms of priority.

NER: So how can we tell them that that's the choice?

MH: I think this is one of the messages that the international community should be sending out to the Iranians, because I am not sure that the Iranian public perceives it that way. They need to hear that message and there are various ways of driving that message home. Let them know this is a package deal.

NER: If the West makes a public stance of their position and the voters in Lebanon or the Palestinian territories understand that is what the West believes, is that an incentive for the voters not vote for Hizballah or Hamas? Also, again in Iran, they hate their regime, but don't they also hate the West?

MH: Let's talk Lebanon since the elections are now underway, I think there is no use discussing Lebanon. But let's focus on Hamas and then Iran. As regards Hamas, I think if you make it known to the Palestinian public well ahead of the elections that if Hamas wins we will have nothing to do with them and we will not support "Hamastan" and the Palestinian Authority and we may pull out of the peace process and so on, I believe it will have an impact. They may publicly say, you know, don't interfere and so on, but I think at the moment of truth when they vote in the ballots this will sink in and it will be a consideration for them. Of that I am quite certain. I would not recommend that Israeli officials say that because that could backfire. But an international official, a U.S. official, yes. I think that could have an impact.

NER: An American official?

MH: Yes. Yes. I think so.

NER: And the Brits?

MH: Yes. Yes. I think so. Definitely. And well ahead of the elections. Not after the elections, but well ahead of them.

As concerns Iran, there is a paradox here that whereas the United States is not very popular in the Middle East, there are two countries where it is very popular. These are Israel and Iran. And I have spoken to quite a few people who are both Iranian and experts on Iran and follow what is going on there. The majority of Iranians are young people, less than 30, and the United States is very popular over there. So don't underestimate the impact that the United States could have over the domestic scene in Iran.