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December 2005

FINAL REPORT- MAXIMIZING OUTCOMES IN ISRAELI AND PALESTINIAN ELECTIONS: EXPLORING SUPPORT FOR A SINGLE PEACE/JUSTICE PLATFORM ACROSS THE DIVIDE

The Center for Research and Cooperation (CRC) in Jerusalem is a newly formed NGO, bringing together a small team of Palestinian and Israeli scholar-practitioners specializing in peacebuilding, human rights and conflict resolution, along with a younger generation of professional facilitators. The main purpose of CRC is to further a just peace by addressing the needs of Israeli and Palestinian societies, through innovative projects drawing cooperatively on the expertise of its associates, supplemented as needed through collaborating with leading international experts. As a policy, CRC endeavors to work in depth with a limited number of projects at a time, hoping to set a positive model of professional Israeli/Palestinian collaborative work. This project, funded by the National Endowment of Democracy, included a feasibility study on the prospects for a new Palestinian political party sharing a common platform with an Israeli counterpart. The project aimed at analyzing within the process of democratization in the Palestinian society, the obstacles and promise for the development of an electoral force with a peace platform shared with an existing political party in Israel. Through a review of secondary sources, a series of interviews with public opinion makers, focus groups with main civil society components and the conduction of a specially designed public opinion poll, CRC were able to attain this objective. The duration of the project was extended several times, given the postponements in the announced elections date for the Palestinian Legislative Council, now scheduled for January 2006. The preliminary findings were shared with the stakeholders (interviewees, participants in the focus groups and potential interested parties) in two workshops that took place in Ramallah during July and September 2005. NED has been receiving progress reports of each stage. The purpose of this final document is to provide within a general analysis of the current political situation, some conclusions and expectations of future trends that could be shared by NED with US NGOs (such as NDI and RIR), governmental agencies as well as disseminate them through their contacts with Palestinian civil society, and political movements.

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Locally, the finding have been circulated among Palestinian and Israeli decision-makers and civil society organizations electronically. During the remaining short time before the Palestinian elections, there will be no further action, in order to maintain CRC's policy of non-interference during the political campaigns.

We should firstly point out that the projections on the Palestinian scene will be impacted by internal processes but also by past and current Israeli policy both in terms of restrictions to daily life as well as political interference with the electoral process. The first Post-Gaza withdrawal scenario is being perceived as stimulated by the armed struggle of militant groups- mainly Hamas- increasing their popularity among the electorate. Furthermore, the policy is seen as aimed at immediately compensate to Israeli hard liners by building more settlements in the West Bank and continue with unilateral decisions. Lack of progress in negotiations and particularly in opening up viable economic options for Gaza is likely to create a confrontation with the Palestinian side. If he opts for this path, Palestinians will lose out to the extremist minorities on both sides, who will be provided with a suitable playground to carry on with their anti-peace activities. New tenders for settlements, the continued building of the wall dipping deeper and deeper into occupied Palestinian territory, and deadly Israeli military incursions only serve to strengthen the impression that Sharon has chosen the first path. A return to fruitful negotiations is the only way to create a win-win situation by reducing the room for maneuver by extremists and violent parties. After the elections, Sharon's second option is to use the current atmosphere of relative calmness to replace his unilateral approach with bilateral negotiations that will strengthen those arguing for a peaceful resolution to the conflict on both sides.

I. In our judgments, the overall picture in which the current trends terms of Palestinian electoral politics can be analyzed are as follows:

1. The election of Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) as President of the Palestinian National Authority, confirmed the first reason for optimism towards the very smooth transfer of government following the death of President Arafat, stressing the importance of fair and transparent elections in the process of democratization. The task confronting Abu Mazen is formidable, for he is inheriting internal anarchy, polarization, political stagnation and corruption compounded by the gloomy atmosphere created by five years of a bloody Intifada.

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2. Currently, Abu Mazen seems intent on breaking away from Arafat's legacy, specifically, he hopes to reform Palestinian political, security and economic systems and above all halt the militarization of the Intifada.
3. The reluctance to engage with energy in a renewed political process may be postponed till after the elections. It seems, though, that with Arafat no longer around and with his galvanizing effect gone, the evolving Palestinian leadership is still short and impotent in dealing with those corrupt officials who could not have survived and thrived that long without their leader, for whom they always acted as sycophantic and obedient cronies and hangers-on in return for tolerating their indulgencies..
4. A logical justification for the weakening of the expected leadership in the prevention of chaos and lawlessness and possibly a destructive power struggle, can be found within the ranks of the heterogeneous Fatah movement. It is worth mentioning that Fatah's various components have always been kept together by Arafat, often through a combination of financial appeasement and a policy of divide and rule. The movement's institutions has been controlled by the old guards of Fatah, thus denying the second and the third generations any control of power, but this has been challenged during the elections. The conflict between the Old guards and Young guards is ongoing which weakens the movement and strengthens the surging role of Hamas as an opposition enjoying a huge political importance and relevance. Fatah, on the other hand, cannot transform into a full-fledged political party because of its pluralism religious/centrist/left secular streams and hence cannot develop a clear political platform. Furthermore Fatah's image of corruption vs. Hamas' benevolent work and institutions make it even worse.
5. One major immediate challenge is being put forth by Hamas and to a lesser extent Islamic Jihad, which, albeit weakened by Israeli relentless military efforts that have deprived both factions from their charismatic leadership, are still major players with capabilities and political ambitions.
6. On the other hand, new political parties are entering the political arena with recognized moderate leadership, often from a left-wing or professional background, Their force may not be electorally strong this time but could point out to the development of potentially democratic and clearly peace-oriented structures in future campaigns



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II. More specifically, the project conclusions are:

- 1) The Palestinian society is overwhelmingly and consistently supportive of the concepts of the democracy and elections as one of its main components (82.1%). However, a majority in some focus groups look at the prospected elections with fear, vulnerability and suspicion. They look at it as an American / Israel request not a Palestinian one. A political activist women said “why to elect new people ... all of them are the same ... they will come to power ... steal us and do not solve our problem.” Unless a new input is made in the elections, participation still may be high but without meaningful expectations.**
- 2) Stressing the attributes of a peace accord in the political parties’ platforms on both sides has been perceived in the past to severely limit the level of popular support. Our indication is that an in-depth discussion of how to adjust the large majority consensus to a two state solution (50.7% in favor and 45,7% against) into an open and shared vision is timely and can translate new individually led initiatives (Beilin/Abed Rabbo’s Geneva Initiative and Ayalon/Nusseibeh’s National Accord,) into political relevant actions**
- 3) The current main political movements (Fatah and Hamas) are falling short of the expectations- in terms of policy and/or performance. About 54% do not think that the existing Palestinian political factions are not characterized by democracy and transparency.**
- 4) About 44% support to see a new political party being organized (strongly support 17.5%, support 26,5%, with 6.3% no opinion), “that will open new political horizons”. Though they lost faith in their political leadership and in the possibility of achieving peace, there is still readiness to work and act towards having genuine and just peace and to have an Israeli partner that seeks real peace.**
- 5) There is a high potential support to a joint Israeli/Palestinian peace platform such as the Geneva Initiative, if presented as a package with its main components rather than associated to particular names, which at times can reach half of the Palestinian electorate (15.1% strongly support and 33.2% support, and 6.3% no opinion).**
- 6) However, most of those interviewed do not see an existing trend of connecting points II-4 and II-5. In other words, if there has been such a new force such as the Initiative Party that launched Mustafa Barghouti in the last presidential elections, it did not clearly relate to shared peace initiatives.**



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Currently, other new parties led by Yassir Abed Rabo may have such tendency but the personalities are not popular as yet with the electorate

- 7) Our pollsters observed that “such a new party could share with an Israeli counterpart the same peace platform shows the support of nearly half of the voters”. But at the same time, they observe that the lack of a culture of democracy or daring to challenge the dominating political power is a hindrance to the establishment of such a party. This was expressed in the following words: “We lack awareness of democracy. We are used to be blind and scared followers. Therefore, we would be scared to express the support for a new and competing party because of fear of being ‘punished’ by the dominating authority”. All in all, the general attitude could be summed up in this statement: “It is impossible for any political party proposing an agenda of alliance with an Israeli counterpart to be given support on golden platter-challenges against it are quite inevitable.”
- 8) Although there is a relatively high level of personal support to the propositions II-4 and II-5, the chances of success’s assessment for such Palestinian (or Israeli) party are not high. Many respondents cannot see how this party’s alliance with an Israeli counterpart would help in anyway adducing that “the Israeli left has not succeeded in influencing the Israeli public as was evident during the elections. Sharon received ample votes and the Israeli left managed to receive insignificant number of seats in the Knesset”, a process that seems to have been strengthened by the split in the Likud party. And yet, such ideas put forth are a prime example of how “peace building could happen through political organization” and how “the idea of forming an alliance between an Israeli and a Palestinian party/coalition helps empower the moderates”
- 9) Even if there would be no absolute majority for a new political force, and perhaps not all those in favor of such outcome may not agree as to the characteristics of such force; still a new party with a shared peace platform could command a substantial support, and as a minority could perform as a “loyal opposition” ally to Fatah, in a peace-oriented coalition. This may not occur in the forthcoming elections, unless postponed, but materialize some time in the future. It may not happen sooner than later unless such course of action is undertaken by a new generation of leaders, outsiders to the current political “establishment”.

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- 10) The discussion so far shows that the participants would like to see the emergence of a new democratic leadership made of moderates and that which is responsive to the immediate needs facing society.
- 11) The issue of representation was also emphasized. It was argued that it is academics and intellectuals that should propose a peace political platform and agenda and in turn garner support to concretize the agenda through elections. “We need new people, new ideas. We need to see moderate people in the political scene. We need radical change in leadership, big huge change,” is one of the major statements made by participants. Other comments included the observation that “leaders should come from the core of Palestinian society and should not be exported from abroad. Those Palestinian leaders who came from abroad brought the corruption and nepotism rampant in the Arab world to us”. This change, however, should also be paralleled with similar change happening on the Israeli side. It was stressed by the participants that new leadership is needed on both sides. Unfortunately, in spite of a general mistrust of traditional politicians and the respect to academics and intellectuals within the Palestinian society, very few of those interviewed seem to be ready to take an active role in the political process.
- 12) It is clear from the discussions that younger women are more positive towards establishing a Palestinian political party made up of moderate Palestinians who would create a common political platform for peace with an Israeli counterpart. Moreover, younger women want change in leadership, whereas older women are concerned about jeopardizing the political power of the PLO and its member parties. Younger women show frustration and distance from current political parties deeming them as obsolete contra to the perception of older women of existing political parties as adequate to represent the Palestinian public and work towards achieving its political aspirations. On the other hand, six targeted groups, including one women group, reiterated that they will not support women in the prospected election since their role is very minimal and not as influential as men. This implies that the level of women representation in the new elections will be less than it has been since 1996.



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- 13) Supporting a political party sharing a common platform with an Israeli counterpart largely depends on its proposed agenda. In particular, support to this party would depend on the extent to which it guarantees Palestinian political and human rights now, and the ability to improve their difficult lives under occupation, the present being not less important than future peace agreements.. The party should be trusted to have an execution plan to implement objectives such as the freedom of movement.

The possibility of an existing political force endorsing a peace platform shared with the Israelis should not II. More specifically, the project conclusions are:

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- 5) There is a high potential support to a joint Israeli/Palestinian peace platform such as the Geneva Initiative, if presented as a package with its main components rather than associated to particular names, which at times can reach half of the Palestinian electorate (15.1% strongly support and 33.2% support, and 6.3% no opinion).
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- 12) Supporting a political party sharing a common platform with an Israeli counterpart largely depends on its proposed agenda. In particular, support to this party would depend on the extent to which it guarantees Palestinian political and human rights now, and the ability to improve their difficult lives under occupation, the present being not less important than future peace agreements.. The party should be trusted to have an execution plan to implement objectives such as the freedom of movement.
- 13) The possibility of an existing political force endorsing a peace platform shared with the Israelis should not be ruled out. Fatah now led by President Mahmoud Abbas was personally involved in such initiative in the past (the Beilin/Abu Mazen agreement) . But it may not be electorally expedient to identify their position with an Israeli force when the main competitor is Hamas.
- 14) A Palestinian political force that has a shared peace platform with an Israeli counterpart, does not necessarily need to concur on domestic policy issues. Originally, the idea of a new Palestinian social/democratic party or through a process of internal democracy Fattah taking a clear endorsement of such ideology was discussed in the early stages of the project. However, it seem at that time premature to link such joint effort through an overall ideological stand.

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- 15) The party should focus a lot on strengthening its outreach to the media. The party has to do a lot of public relations work with the West especially, by all means possible to raise awareness about the Palestinian standpoint. Allying with an Israeli party/coalition in terms of a shared platform would definitely help in making Palestinian peace initiatives more visible to the West. “The best way to garner support for this party is to have the US back it up with some political clout”. International and European support is also important.
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