

Conference Call with Dr. Kobi Michael

Omri Ceren: Thank you for that, thank you everybody for joining us on what I know was short notice, and thank you in advance to our speaker, Dr. Kobi Michael, about whom I'll be speaking in a second. We wanted to bring folks together with Dr. Michael to discuss and begin to evaluate what the announcement that came out of the Middle East a couple hours ago, which is that the Israelis have suspended peace talks in response to the announcement made yesterday by the Palestinians that Fatah and Hamas had inked a unity agreement. The developments stateside so far are relatively straightforward. The administration came out with a statement that was supportive. This came after yesterday, the State Department spokeswoman, Jen Psaki, had said that "it's hard to see how Israel can be expected to negotiate with a government that doesn't recognize its existence." So from the perspective of what's happening in Washington, things have been rela- exactly as you would expect based on past administration statements, which harshly criticized these kinds of moves. We wanted to bring you together with Dr. Kobi Michael to discuss what the Israeli calculations are and what's happening on that side. He's a senior lecturer at Ariel University's Department of Political Science. He's a senior researcher at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv and before that or, alongside that, until September 2013, he was the deputy director general at the Ministry, at Israel's Ministry of Strategic Affairs. I'll hand the call over to him. After that, we will go to questions and answers. You'll be prompted to enter the Q&A queue. And, as always, if you have questions or concerns, and I'll repeat this at the end of the call, hit us up at press@theisraelproject.org, press@theisraelproject.org. And at this point, I'll turn the call over to Dr. Michael.

Dr. Michael: Thank you very much and good afternoon everybody. With your permission, I would like to begin with a general overview regarding the reconciliation agreement and then I will change to the Israeli response in this regard. And I will try to make a sort of a short, strategic analysis regarding the current situation. So, first of all, I would like to say that looking at the situation, at the agreement, in a historical perspective, actually there is nothing new under the sun, in the sense that this is at least, and formally, the [inaudible] time that Fatah and Hamas are reaching to an agreement between them. Therefore, I would say that there is also a very good chance that this agreement will not be fulfilled in the coming future or, as we have noticed in the previous occasions, the Cairo agreement and the Doha agreement. The gaps between Fatah and Hamas are so wide and deep that I can see no small possibility for any sort of a bridge between these gaps. And maybe later on, I will try to elaborate a

bit on the gaps between both sides and the differences between their strategic interests.

Actually, in the current agreement there is not so much. They have agreed about two general topics, one of them is the establishment of the government and the second thing is about the coming election. Even those two topics that they have agreed upon are very general in their essence and actually they have things to discuss between them in order to put them online. I would say that the move that Abu Mazen has done is a sort of, I would say that he slapped on the face of America and of course on the face of the political process, and on the face of the State of Israel, in the sense that, once again, when he came to the, to the junction where he has to make the major decision regarding the continuation of the negotiation and the political process, the Palestinian leader, now Abu Mazen, before that it was Arafat, decides to run away.

And actually, this agreement is a sort of [inaudible] of Abu Mazen, of internal issues I would say, at least for the very short future, on the political process and the [inaudible]. I would say that if the reconciliation will succeed, and even if it will fail, there is a sort of a thing, and no one's saying that Abu Mazen regarding the [inaudible], an idea that can be reconciled with an organization which is defined and recognized as a terror organization, not only by the State of Israel and not only by the United States, but by the international community as a whole. And he prefers to reconcile with this organization which rejects the right of the State of Israel even to exist. In any border, I would say that [inaudible] regarding the preferences, the strategic preferences and priorities that he and the Palestinians actually have. And now any Palestinians saying about the reconciliation, the sort of expression or reflection of democracy, actually is another false and another lie. Because according to our experience in the Arab world, and mainly in the last four years of the so-called Arab spring, the Arab awakening as I prefer calling it, we see that there is not even a single place in the Arab world where the political Islam actually can exist in democracy and to maintain democracy. And therefore, and Hamas of course uses political Islam, they are a part, a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, and therefore to talk about Hamas and democracy is sort of oxymoron. And I think that we have to reject such sayings.

Hamas is a terror organization that rules the Gaza Strip and actually rejects all the conditions that were made by the Quartet. There are three conditions that were made by the Quartet, and of course by rejecting the three conditions of the Quartet, Hamas rejects the negotiations with the State of Israel and rejects the political strategy and [inaudible] strategy and they view that the preferred strategy is the 'resistance,' the 'armed resistance' meaning terror. And just a week ago, in a big, big event that was in the Gaza Strip, Ismael Haniyeh said publicly and loudly that in a few years the armed

struggle, or the armed 'resistance' of Hamas will eliminate the State of Israel, it will demolish the State of Israel. And therefore, I think in order to summarize that, in the Israeli perspective, the Palestinian coalition led by Abu Mazen once again speaks in double language. When they say that on the one hand they prefer the political track and negotiations, but on the other hand they are reconciling with a terror organization. It's something that they have to explain. I think that at least in our perception, in our eyes, this is something which you just don't do.

And I think that the Palestinian leadership is also lying when it says that the State of Israel refuses to negotiate with them, where there are two Palestinian entities, one in the Gaza Strip and the other one in the West Bank, and therefore, they have to unify in order to negotiate with Israel. Actually Israel negotiated with Abu Mazen and with the PLO and the PA since the days of [inaudible] was prime minister and I would like to remind those of you who maybe forget that Hamas ruled Gaza Strip since 2006, and actually ruled by [inaudible] since June 2007. And Ehud Olmert was the Prime Minister to almost the end of 2009, and even negotiations were held by the current government, they were held with Abu Mazen, there is an independent, or almost independent, Palestinian entity in the Gaza Strip, which is Hamas.

The last thing that I would like to say is maybe to [inaudible] generally the big divisions, the gaps between Hamas and the Fatah, gaps that at least according to my analysis, will not allow them to bridge, and actually to fulfill, or to implement the reconciliation agreement. So first of all, we have to understand that on the ground we have two Palestinian entities, which are independent entities. The first one is Hamas in Gaza and the second one is the PA in the West Bank. They have two different security apparatuses, and I cannot even imagine that Hamas will allow Abu Mazen's security apparatus to come to the Gaza Strip and to take responsibility over them. And on the other hand, I cannot imagine that Abu Mazen or the Fatah cabals or the security apparatuses in the West Bank will agree to accept some Hamas officers or some Hamas security personnel to their apparatuses in the West Bank. Secondly, we have to understand that there are very big cultural and religious gaps between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. There is a huge gap regarding the strategy that should be used in the, towards Israel, let's say before the PLO, at least formally they prefer and they believe in negotiation and in the political process or the political strategy, whereas Hamas prefers and believes in the military strategy or in terror strategy or the 'resistance,' the armed struggle and resistance strategy, and they cannot see any sort of understanding or any sort of a bridge between these two approaches towards Israel. And the last thing that we have to take into consideration is the idea that even the rules system and the political system in the Gaza Strip is totally different than the legal and

the political system in the West Bank and I cannot see how actually they combine between these two different systems. And therefore, I'm not mentioning of course the idea of the representation of Hamas in the PLO. As you know, Hamas is not yet represented in the PLO, and they feel that they have to be represented by 40 to 50 percent. I think that if Fatah will be very, very generous with them, they will give them something between 10 to 15 percent, and I cannot see how they can bridge between these two conditions. So in order to summarize, I think that the deal is very bad, although I think that the chance or the probability that this agreement will be fulfilled are very low.

Omri Ceren: Thank you for that overview. Thank you for that overview, and we've got enough questions by email that I don't think we're going to get to the question/answer queue. So if you have something urgent that you'd like us to ask Dr. Michael, kick it over to press@ while the call is going on; otherwise, at the end we can pass on additional questions after we finish. But we've got time just for a couple of questions. One question that we got that I don't think was addressed was to what degree the Europeans are playing a helpful role or an unhelpful role, or from the perspective of the Americans and the perspective of the Israelis. Traditionally, the EU has taken a firm stance against Hamas's incorporation into the PA unless they meet the Quartet agreements but there are discussions this morning about a potential change in policy, and I wanted to ask you to speak about how Europe is positioning themselves vis-a-vis this development and how the Israelis and Palestinians are positioning themselves in relation to Europe.

Dr. Michael: I think that Europe in a sense has a sort of responsibility in this regard, not the main responsibility but that they have responsibility because they [inaudible], well we have to be conscious in this regard when we say the Europeans, what we mean by the Europeans. We mean the EU, the formal EU, or we mean some European states that behave in an independent policy. But generally speaking I think that many times European countries just prefer to close their eyes, not to condemn Hamas. Look what and how difficult it was even for Europe to recognize Hezbollah as a terror organization, and actually Europe recognized Hezbollah as a terror organization just last year, after the event in Burgas, Bulgaria. And I think that, you know there are many, many times where the Europeans just play by the rules of the game that were shaped by Hamas and the PA -- closing their eyes and assisting the Hamas in this way or another, and criticizing Israel where Israel tried to fight against Hamas or to retaliate when Hamas launched rockets towards cities and settlements in the State of Israel, in the south of the State of Israel. And therefore, I think that they have in a sense sort of responsibility, but I think that they understand, at least the EU, in the formal level,

understand that [inaudible], that Hamas is a problem and I think that they understand that the idea of reconciliation is something which will not promote the political process, and therefore I think that they are not particularly happy from this process, although I personally would not be surprised that in a day or two, in a week or two, we will hear some interpretation from some European politician about the probability of creating a new reality, a more positive reality in the Palestinian arena that might assist the political process, and they will find some excuses why there is a reason even to encourage the reconciliation process. I would not be surprised if I will hear it. But I think at least in the formal level, I think that they perceive the reconciliation agreement as something that is not promoting or assisting or encouraging the political process.

Omri Ceren: We've got time for one last question, and this is something that I hadn't seen addressed elsewhere, so I was hoping that you could share some insights with the folks on this call. Which is, there are broad predictions, including the ones that you made earlier, and broad assessments about why this is, the unity deal will fail from, you know the inability to integrate the security forces, Hamas' reluctance to give up its arsenal, lingering resentment from past battles, and so on. But one thing that hasn't been discussed is what happens if this falls apart. So it appears that Abbas has brought himself a lot of criticism for this, certainly the Hamas guys think that this is an opportunity to break kind of the diplomatic siege and the economic siege that they've been put under by Israel and Egypt. What happens if this disintegrates, if the predictions prove correct and if the unity deal fails? Do we go back to where we were? Is it something else? Will there be resentment on the streets? Will there be a backlash? What are the likely scenarios?

Dr. Michael: If it will fail?

Omri Ceren: If it'll fail.

Dr. Michael: I think that it depends on, on the Palestinian leadership because it will bring us back to square number one, which is actually the square that we were in just before the agreement was signed. I would like to remind you that the negotiations were still free, OK. There were negotiations about the negotiations. But actually, Abu Mazen refused to negotiate and he said no to the American proposal, while the government of Israel said yes to the American proposal. And actually during the last week and a half, there were very intensive negotiations held by the Americans, the Israelis, and the Palestinians about resuming the negotiations. So if the reconciliation agreement will fail, then the Palestinian leadership, meaning Abu Mazen, will find itself in the stage that they were in just two days before, two days ago. And the question would be if at this

stage and after the third failure of reconciliation agreement with Hamas, they will reach to the right lessons and they will come back to direct negotiations with the State of Israel towards a political agreement, and I hope it will be a final and just agreement between two nation states -- the State of Palestine and the State of Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people. But as far as I understand the situation, I am not sure that there is ripeness among the Palestinian leadership and readiness to go back to serious and genuine negotiation even if the reconciliation agreement will fail.

Omri Ceren: And on that note, that is all the time that we have for today. Thank you again Dr. Kobi Michael for joining us. Thank you all of you who dialed in. As always, if you have more questions or concerns, you can hit us at press@theisraelproject.org, press@theisraelproject.org. And, have a good afternoon everybody. Have a good evening Dr. Michael.