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The Big Gamble

I MET Salam Fayyad, the Palestinian Prime Minister, two weeks ago, and was again impressed by the calm and modesty he radiates.

Generally, I meet him at demonstrations, such as those at the Bil'in fence. This time, too, there was no opportunity for more than a perfunctory handshake and a few polite words.

We appeared together at the Land Day event in a small village near Qalqilyah, whose name is known only to a few: Izbat al-Tabib. The village was established in 1920, and the occupation authorities do not recognize its existence. They want to demolish it and transfer its extensive lands to the nearby Alfei Menashe settlement.

We were surrounded by a large group of respectable personalities – the heads of neighboring villages and officials of the parties that belong to the PLO – as well as the inhabitants of the village. I could speak to him only from the rostrum. I entreated him to strengthen the cooperation between the Palestinian leadership and the Israeli peace camp, a cooperation that has weakened since the assassinations of Yasser Arafat and Faisal Husseini.

IT IS impossible not to like Fayyad. He radiates decency, seriousness and a sense of responsibility. He invites trust. None of the filth of corruption has stuck to him. He is no party functionary. Only after much hesitation did he join a small party ("the Third Way"). In the confrontation between Fatah and Hamas, he does not belong to either of the two rival blocs. He looks like a bank manager – and that is what he indeed was: a senior official of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

The 58-year old Fayyad is the very opposite of Yasser Arafat, who first appointed him as Finance Minister. The Ra'is radiated authority, the Prime Minister radiates diffidence. Arafat was an extrovert, Fayyad is an introvert. Arafat was a man of dramatic gestures, Fayyad does not know what a gesture is.

But the biggest difference between the two lies in their methods. Arafat did not put all his eggs into one basket, he used many baskets. He was ready to use – simultaneously or alternatively – diplomacy and the armed struggle, popular action and secret channels, moderate and radical groups. He believed that the Palestinian people were much too weak to dispense with any instrument.

Fayyad, on the other hand, puts all his – and the Palestinians' – eggs in one basket. He chose a single strategy and sticks to it. That is a personal and national gamble – and bold and dangerous indeed.

FAYYAD BELIEVES, so it seems, that the Palestinians'

only chance to achieve their national goals is by non-violent means, in close cooperation with the US.

His plan is to build the Palestinian national institutions and create a robust economic base, and, by the end of 2011, to declare the State of Palestine.

This is reminiscent of the classic Zionist strategy under David Ben-Gurion. In Zionist parlance, this was called "creating facts on the ground".

Fayyad's plan is based on the assumption that the US will recognize the Palestinian state and impose on Israel the well-known peace terms: two states, return to the 1967 borders with small and agreed-upon land swaps, East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine, evacuation of all settlements which are not included in the land swap, the return of a symbolic number of refugees to Israeli territory and the settlement of the others in Palestine and elsewhere.

THAT LOOKS like a sensible strategy, but it raises many questions.

First question: Can the Palestinians really rely on the US to play their part?

In the last few weeks, the chances of this happening have improved. After his impressive victories in the domestic and foreign arenas, President Obama is demonstrating a new self-confidence in Israeli-Palestinian matters. He may now be ready to impose on both parties an American peace plan that includes those elements.

The US has made it clear that this is not a side-show, but a strategy based on a sober assessment of American national interests, supported by the military leadership.

But the decisive battle has not yet been joined. One can expect a Battle of Titans between the two most powerful lobbies in Washington: the military lobby and the pro-Israel lobby. The White House versus the Congress. Fayyad's gamble is based on the hope that Barack Obama, with the help of General David Petraeus, will win this struggle.

It's a reasonable gamble, but a risky one.

SECOND QUESTION: Is it possible to build a Palestinian "state-to-be" under Israeli occupation?

As of now, Fayyad is succeeding. There is indeed some prosperity in the West Bank, which, however, benefits mainly a certain class. The Netanyahu government supports this effort, under the illusion that "economic peace" can serve as a substitute for real peace.

But this entire effort stands on feet of clay. The occupation authorities can wipe everything out at one stroke. We have witnessed this already in the May

2002 "Defensive Wall" operation, when the Israeli army destroyed at one stroke everything the Palestinians had built following the Oslo agreement. I have seen with my own eyes the destroyed offices of the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah, the crushed computers, the heaps of ragged documents scattered over the floors of the Ministries of Education and Health, the broken walls of the Mukata'a.

If the Israeli government so decides, all the well-ordered government offices of Fayyad, all the new enterprises and economic initiatives, will go up in smoke.

Fayyad relies on the American security net. And indeed, it is questionable whether Netanyahu can do in 2010, in the Obama era, what Ariel Sharon did in 2002 under George W. Bush.

An important component of the new situation is "Dayton's army". The US general Keith Dayton is training the Palestinian security forces. Anyone who has seen them knows that this is for all practical purposes a regular army. (At the Land Day demonstration, the Palestinian soldiers, with their helmets and khaki uniforms, were deployed on the hill, while the Israeli soldiers, similarly attired, were deployed below. That was in Area C, which according to the Oslo agreements is under Israeli military control. Both armies used the same American jeeps, just differently colored.)

No doubt Fayyad is aware that there is only a narrow divide between his strategy and collaboration with the occupation.

THIRD QUESTION: What will happen if the Palestinians declare their state at the end of 2011?

Many Palestinians are sceptical. After all, the Palestinian National Council already declared an independent Palestinian state in 1988. On that festive occasion, the Palestinian Declaration of Independence, written by the poet Mahmoud Darwish, was read out. It had an uncanny resemblance to the Israeli Declaration of Independence. Dozens of countries recognized this state, and the PLO representatives there enjoy the official status of ambassadors. But did this improve the situation of the Palestinians?

The main question is whether the US will recognize the Palestinian state on the day of its foundation, and whether the UN Security Council will follow suit.

In May, 1948, the USA accorded to the new State of Israel de facto but not de jure recognition. Stalin forestalled them by recognizing Israel de jure right away.

If Fayyad's hope comes true and the US recognizes the State of Palestine, the Palestinians' situation will

change dramatically. Almost certainly, the Israeli government will have no choice but to sign a peace agreement that will be practically dictated by the Americans. Israel will have to give up almost the entire West Bank.

FOURTH QUESTION: Will this apply to Gaza?

Probably yes. Contrary to the demonic image created by Israeli and American propaganda, Hamas wants a Palestinian state, not an Islamic emirate. Like our own Orthodox, who aim at a Jewish state ruled by religious law and the rabbis, they know how to compromise with reality. Hamas' aims are not restricted to the small enclave they now control. They want to play a major role in the future State of Palestine.

The official position of Hamas is that they will accept an agreement signed by the Palestinian authority if it is ratified by the Palestinian people in a referendum or by an act of parliament. It should be noted that even now, Hamas treats the Fayyad experiment with relative indulgence.

Fayyad is a man of compromise. He would have reached a modus vivendi with Hamas long ago, if the US had not imposed a total veto.

The Palestinian split is, to a large extent, made in the US and Israel. Israel has contributed to it by disrupting all physical contact between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip – in gross violation of the Oslo agreement, which defines the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as one integral territory. Israel undertook to open four "safe passages" between the two territories. They were not opened for a single day.

The Americans have a primitive model of the world, inherited from the days of the Wild West: everywhere there are Good Guys and Bad Guys. In Palestine, the Good Guys are the Palestinian Authority people, the Bad Guys are Hamas. Fayyad will have to work hard to convince Washington to adopt a stance a little bit more nuanced.

WHAT WILL happen if Fayyad's gamble proves to be an historic mistake? If the pro-Israel lobby wins against the statesmen and the generals? Or if some world crisis diverts the attention of the White House into another direction?

If Fayyad fails, every Palestinian will draw the self-evident conclusion: there is no chance whatsoever for a peaceful solution. A bloody intifada will follow, Hamas will take control of the Palestinian people - until they, too, are supplanted by far more radical forces.

Salam Fayyad can indeed say: After me, the deluge.

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