Middle East: Faint Glimmer of Hope

written by David Finkel | November 20, 2009

There's a glimmer – a very faint glimmer – of hope arising from recent developments in Palestine. I'm referring to the statement by Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) that he will not seek re-election as "president" of the Palestinian Authority (PA), in essence a statement of resignation. If Abu Mazen stands by his resignation, it will deliver a much-needed kick in the teeth to the Obama administration. President Obama's performance in regard to Israel-Palestine has mirrored his stance on health care — where he promised universal care and then allowed the insurance lobby to draft the bill and the Catholic bishops to write amendments stripping away abortion rights. The U.S. president boldly announced a demand for Israel to halt settlement construction and then, when Israeli prime minister Netanyahu responded by announcing the construction of 3000 new settlement units to be followed by a "temporary partial freeze" that wouldn't even include East Jerusalem, the Administration called for the Palestinians to enter negotiations anyway. The message was delivered to the PA by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who called Netanyahu's acceptance of a "provisional Palestinian state" without defined borders an "historic step." Clinton has done nothing to achieve Middle East peace, but she's accomplished a miracle of comparable magnitude – she's made us nostalgic for Condoleezza Rice. Abu Mazen responded in the only manner compatible with salvaging the last shred of his political and personal dignity – telling Obama and Clinton he's finished. There are one too many knives stuck in his back, and American betrayals have destroyed his ability to lead. Remember that all this occurred after the U.S. administration coerced Abu Mazen into asking the United Nations to bury the Goldstone Report – a position he was forced to reverse due to Palestinian outrage, completing his humiliation and his (please forgive the expression) political castration. Obama and Clinton have assumed that President Abbas is their puppet. This premise in fact is false – he is a conservative, compromising and now deeply discredited nationalist, but a Palestinian nationalist nonetheless. His resignation, leaving the U.S. policy of capitulation to every Israeli dictate without a figleaf, is the final service he could give to the Palestinian cause. What next? I said there's a faint glimmer of hope. This requires, first, that Abu Mazen sticks to his position in the face of massive pressure from the United States, Arab governments and the corrupt entrenched PA bureaucracy to rescind his resignation. It requires, second, an internal Palestinian political renovation that would coalesce around a leader capable of effectively waging both resistance and negotiation – the best candidate for which would be the imprisoned militant Marwan Barghouti. And it would require, third, that the growing international campaign of boycott/divestment/sanctions (BDS) force the United States to recognize the reality of Israel's isolation and its declining value as a "strategic asset" so long as the Occupation continues. Under these circumstances, the logjam in the Israel-Palestine disaster might start to break. If not – in particular, if U.S. pressure coerces Mahmoud Abbas to come back after all, meaning that he is effectively converted to the puppet the Americans thought he was – then the current glimmer of hope will be lost and any possibility of a viable "two-state solution" can be buried once and for all