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The Middle East: intractable conflict?: the Israeli-Palestinian impasse: will this time be different?

Report

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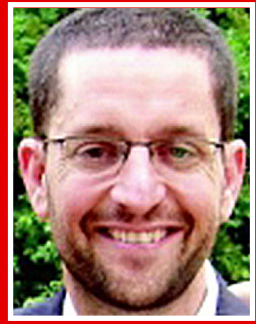
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The Israeli-Palestinian Impasse: Will this Time be Different?



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It is past time to stop talking about starting negotiations; it is time to move forward.' Thus announced President Barack Obama after his summit meeting with Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, and Chairman of the Palestinian Authority (PA), Mahmoud Abbas, on the margins of the opening of the United Nations General Assembly. Obama has joined the ranks of previous US presidents who have urged Israel and the Palestinians to resolve their 100 year long conflict, to no avail. Developments on the ground, the positions of Israel and the Palestinians, and the limited influence of the US make it unlikely that the outcome of this most recent attempt will be any different.

THE SECOND NETANYAHU GOVERNMENT AND THE PEACE PROCESS

Within the Israeli government, there are currently two key decision-makers driving policy towards the Palestinians: Defence Minister Ehud Barak and Prime Minister Netanyahu. Barak's power derives not from his role as leader of the Labour party, which holds only 13 members out of the 74 strong coalition, but rather from his standing in Israel's security establishment and his position as Defence Minister, the Defence Community's representative in the government. In an interview with the Israeli daily Haaretz Barak argued that bilateral negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians will not yield an agreement, noting that the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians is ridden with suspicions, with the impact of bloodletting on both sides still very visible. On the other hand, he also emphasized that Israel has peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan and that any obstacles to achieving peace with other Arab countries will not be insurmountable — especially in the Gulf. Thus, he envisions the peace process progressing along two tracks concurrently: small but significant confidence-

building measures vis-à-vis Arab states, and grand regional projects. This two-pronged strategy, Barak contends, will create the political conditions that could lead to a regional peace agreement, which would include a settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute along the lines of the two-state solution.

The second and more significant decision-maker is Prime Minister Netanyahu. Unlike Barak, who prefers to deal with the Palestinians through a regional framework, Netanyahu proposes a bottom-up approach involving three strands: developing the Palestinian economy; supporting the Palestinian security forces (as long as they are committed to fighting terrorism); and unconditionally resuming negotiations. Netanyahu has stated that employing such a tripartite policy could create the setting for achieving peace with the Palestinians. However, he conditions this on the Palestinians 'clearly and unambiguously recognis[ing] Israel as the state of the Jewish people', and has demanded that the territory under future Palestinian control will be 'demilitarized with ironclad security provisions for Israel'.

On the basis of these statements by the Israeli Premier and his Defence Minister, it would seem that the government is inclined at least to explore the possibility of peace with the Palestinians through either a regional framework or bilateral negotiations.



'Deal or no deal?' Benjamin Netanyahu and Mahmoud Abbas shake hands in New York.

However, even taking Netanyahu's and Barak's statements at face value, the peace process faces a number of formidable obstacles. One is the composition of the current Israeli government. Three of the six parties comprising Netanyahu's government, and many members of his own Likud party, would be absolutely opposed to the concessions that would be required for a future settlement with the Palestinians. Nowhere is this reflected more strongly than in Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman's

outright rejection of the Annapolis peace framework that Israel, the Palestinians and most of the international community agreed to in November 2007. Should there even be significant progress let alone the prospect of a final agreement with the Palestinians, the government in its current form would most likely collapse.

The ongoing expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem poses another problem for peace. To date, there are 289,600 Jewish settlers living in the West Bank and some 190,000 Israelis living beyond the Green Line in East Jerusalem. The network of highways connecting the large settlement blocs with the centre of Israel is expanding and construction of the security wall continues. While threatening irreversible changes to the political geography of the West Bank, the expansion of Jewish settlements is severely jeopardising the viability of a future Palestinian state. And on this front, the conflict may be nearing a point of no return: as long as the settlement project continues to expand, Israel's commitment to, and the statements of its leaders about, a final peace deal are questionable.

In the past, the Israeli centre-left has been vociferous about its opposition to the expansion of settlements. This expansion was perceived as a major impediment to ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through either a two-state solution or by a unilateral end to Israeli occupation such as the 2005 withdrawal from Gaza. But since the collapse of the Oslo Peace Process and the eruption of the Second Intifadah, the 2006 war with Hizballah, and the ongoing conflict with Hamas, things have changed. This chain of events has been interpreted by many Israelis as vindicating the longstanding claim of right-wing politicians, that rather than yielding political gains or peace dividends, withdrawals from territories under Israeli control would create grave security risks. As a result, Israel's internal political landscape shifted significantly to the right, meaning that if the Netanyahu government decides to expand Jewish settlements it is unlikely to encounter significant domestic opposition.

THE DIVIDED PALESTINIANS

The obstacles to peace posed by Israel's domestic politics are being compounded by a crisis in Palestinian politics. President Abbas and his Fatah party have been unable, so far, to challenge Hamas—militarily or politically—since the Islamic movement took control of the Gaza Strip by force in June 2007. Abbas now presides over only 60 per cent of the Palestinians, with the remaining 40 per cent under Hamas control. Abbas and his Prime Minister Salam Fayyad,



Expanding **Israeli settlements** jeopardise the viability of a Palestinian state.

have taken measures to consolidate Fatah's and the PA's standing in the West Bank. This involved an understanding with Israel that the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) and forces loyal to Abbas would destroy any armed opposition to the rule of the Palestinian leader, including Fatah's Aqsa Martyrs Brigade and Hamas's Izz al-din al-Qassam. Concurrently, under the Dayton initiative, the US and the PA developed Palestinian security forces loyal to Abbas. In addition to building the PA's security apparatus, Abbas consolidated his political base in Fatah and

has sought to increase Fatah's appeal to the Palestinian public. This constituted the backdrop for the Sixth Fatah Convention held August 2009 in Ramallah, which unanimously elected Abbas as chair of Fatah and voted in a new leadership of Fatah's Central Committee (FCC). The election process was democratic and transparent. The new leadership includes many that were imprisoned in Israel (e.g., Jibril Rajoub, Marwan Barghouti, Mohammed Dahlan, Hussein al-Sheik) or were Fatah members in Lebanon (Majmoud al-Aloul, Muhammad al-Madani, Jamal Muheisen). Hence, the group is perceived as less corrupt and more patriotic than the previous FCC leadership. The PA has also managed to improve the economic situation in the West Bank: in 2009 economic activity and investor confidence increased and, for the first time in years, Palestinian per capita GDP growth is positive.

Notwithstanding these developments the positions of Abbas, Fatah, and the PA are fragile. Mirroring the Israeli mood, many Palestinians have become utterly disillusioned by the failed peace process. Economic recovery in the West Bank is tenuous as it depends on Israel not reinstating the security measures which in the past limited the movements of people and trade. Hence, it is uncertain whether the growth in 2009 will become a trend towards sustainable economic growth. And political and military consolidation is dependent on US support and cooperation with Israel. Therefore, to many Palestinians the PA's actions look like collusion, designed to promote the interests of Palestinian officials rather than the Palestinian people. For example, when the Gazans were exposed to ferocious Israeli attacks during the December 2008-January 2009 war with Hamas, the PA's silence amid the conflict was thundering.



Barack Obama's speech in Cairo belied the fact that his approach to the Israel-Palestine conflict is similar to his predecessor.

Having survived the Israeli onslaught and the ongoing economic blockade imposed by Israel, Hamas continues to consolidate its rule over the Gaza Strip, further undermining Abbas's weak position. Hamas refuses to meet the three basic requirements of the Diplomatic Quartet: to renounce violence, recognize Israel, and respect previously signed agreements between Israel and the PA. Consequently, Hamas has been excluded from the current round of peace negotiations. Yet it is worth recalling that Hamas's sponsored violence in the form of horrific suicide bombings during the Oslo Process, was a key factor in the collapse of this initiative. Hamas's ability to inflict damage is even greater now given its enhanced military capability, and the political, financial and military support it receives from Iran and Syria. Hence, unless the divide in Palestinian politics is resolved in a way that will enable either the PA or the PLO to negotiate with Israel on behalf of all Palestinian factions including Hamas, the current peace talks are doomed to failure; amid the Palestinian divide Abbas is unable to make any significant progress in the peace process, let alone conclude and implement a final agreement.

In two key respects the Bush and Obama administrations are different. Firstly, the Bush administration was perceived to be heavily tilted towards supporting Israel. Obama's Cairo speech and the 'engagement' policy towards Iran and Syria, have altered this impression. Secondly, the Bush administration was always reluctant whilst, from the outset, the Obama administration has been committed to the peace process. Notwithstanding this, the US has so far been unsuccessful in advancing the peace process with Israel, the Palestinians, and the pro Western Arab states. Israel has resisted the President's call to freeze settlements, whilst Saudi-Arabia has refused to make any confidence-building gestures towards Israel. Even the enfeebled Abbas only at the eleventh hour accepted President Obama's invitation to join the summit meeting at the UN with President Netanyahu.

There are two reasons why we should not be surprised by the lack of US impact. One is that, despite the rhetoric, the policies of the Obama and Bush administrations towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are quite similar. Hence, Abbas is expected to deliver

on the Palestinian side notwithstanding the divide in Palestinian politics; Israel is not under any significant pressure to halt settlement expansion; and the Road Map of Peace of 2002 and the Annapolis framework of 2007 still constitute the main diplomatic reference points. The second is the multiple challenges confronting the US, and President Obama specifically. From passing the health reform bill, through overcoming the financial crises beleaguering the global economy, to dealing with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and challenging Iran's nuclear programme, these items are higher on the agenda than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Thus, faced with a peace process in tatters, it is doubtful whether the US will be able to muster the resolve and resources that might produce an end to the protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict.