

Peace Castles in the Air?

Gerald Steinberg

If necessity is the mother of political invention, the meetings between PM Ehud Olmert and President Mahmoud Abbas, choreographed by the Bush administration, should be very productive. A dramatic breakthrough resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would certainly be a major boost for all three governments.

However, the substance of any such agreement and its long-term impact are far from clear. Skeptics (or realists) note that a lasting peace requires a wide societal acceptance of compromise, and this will still take many years once the maps in Palestinian textbooks start to include Israel. Until then, a facade that provides the illusion of the "end of conflict", but without the political foundation, would be very costly. The 1983 Lebanon-Israel peace treaty was built on very thin air and collapsed quickly.

In contrast, optimists believe that the very weakness of Abbas and the Fateh movement and Olmert's Kadima-led coalition provides the opportunity for a bold agreement. Fateh and Abbas are in no position to make impossible demands of Israel and this is the best time for a pragmatic compromise. On the Israeli side, Olmert remains vulnerable and needs a new program to replace the failed strategy of unilateral disengagement. Negotiations with Abbas and Salam Fayyad and the prospect of an historic agreement to "end the conflict" give Olmert and Kadima a chance for recovery.

Similarly, the US government--the perennial third party in Middle East peace efforts--needs a major diplomatic success. The colossal failure in conducting the Iraq war and the losses sustained in the 2006 congressional elections are behind this renewed activity.

On this basis, the first real engagement since the collapse of the Oslo process began with confidence-building measures. Israel released 250 Palestinians held on charges related to terror, members of Fateh's Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades promised to lay down their weapons and take up the path of peace in exchange for immunity and Israel announced some relaxation of security measures and checkpoints. Predictably, critics denounced these steps: for Palestinians they provided far too little; for Israelis they risked an increase in terror attacks.

Nevertheless, the CBMs were sufficient to set the stage for the resumption of regular talks between Abbas and Olmert. The goal, as repeated in Washington and Jerusalem, is to progress toward the creation of a Palestinian state and, on this basis, toward the long awaited two-state agreement to end the conflict, to be endorsed by an international conference (or workshop) that may (or may not) include high-level Saudi participation.

The next phase of such a pragmatic approach would be to draw borders, but since the Gaza Strip cannot be included in a Palestinian state under the control of Hamas the focus is on interim boundaries. On the West Bank, Abbas would need to convince Palestinians to accept the major post-1967 settlement blocs, perhaps offset by land swaps. And the Israeli government would have to agree to a large-scale withdrawal from Judea and Samaria.

Once this very complex issue is resolved the leaders can turn their attention to the core identity and ideological issues. During the 2000 Camp David summit, Yasser Arafat rejected the efforts to resolve Palestinian refugee claims and Jerusalem issues and accept a sovereign Jewish state. Positions have hardened, and in the years of terrorism that followed, Israelis have become less willing to take risks or make fundamental concessions on these issues. No conceivable Israeli government will agree to rewrite history by accepting moral responsibility for the 1948 Arab invasion and the resulting refugee problem, or to re-divide Jerusalem and again risk the eventual exclusion of Jews from their sacred sites.

Skeptics note that even if these obstacles could somehow be overcome and agreement reached, implementation is an entirely different and far more complex challenge. Hamas will increase its denunciations of Abbas as a traitor to Arafat's legacy and the agreement will be rejected as lacking legitimacy, as in the case of the 1983 Lebanon-Israel Treaty. In Israel, advisors and commentators warn of the possibility of a sudden rapprochement between Fateh and Hamas that would scuttle any agreement, while the settlement movement will fight intensively to prevent withdrawal from the heart of the historic Land of Israel. In addition, as Defense Minister and Labor Party leader Ehud Barak has declared, the lessons of the Gaza and Lebanon withdrawals highlight the need for an effective anti-rocket defense system before Israel removes or reduces its security presence elsewhere. Barak has ridiculed the suggestion that a peace agreement is imminent.

Olmert and Abbas are intelligent enough to recognize these limitations along with the need to first build societal support for the "painful compromises" necessary to sustain an agreement. But neither wants to be seen in the US or Europe as not making the effort to achieve peace. As a result the talks, photo-ops and optimistic reports will continue, at least for now. Whether progress toward substantive and lasting agreement can be made by weak leaders with nothing to lose remains to be seen.- *Published 13/8/2007 © bitterlemons.org*

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