

# Weak Leaders and No Common Ground

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The tragic record of Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations does not bode well for a new round, particularly given the weak standing of the leaders. Despite the Mecca accord and the Palestinian unity government, the internal power struggle and street violence is likely to resume. And on the Israeli side, the Olmert-Peretz government may not survive the report of the Winograd Commission investigating the conduct of last summer's war in Lebanon.

But the obstacles to serious and lasting agreements that will improve the lives of both Israelis and Palestinians go far beyond the crises of the current governments. Strong leaders with broad societal support are necessary to negotiate the type of historic agreements that have eluded eager peace negotiators since 1947.

In this environment, the revival of the Saudi-Arab League initiative (presented in March 2002 as part of the Saudis' campaign to repair their image after the 9/11 attacks) provides thin hope. The main driving force is the fear of Shi'ite and Iranian hegemony and threats to the survival of the Sunni Arab regimes. Core Israeli-Palestinian issues, such as mutual acceptance, refugee claims, terror, boundaries and the complexities of sharing Jerusalem are secondary in this agenda.

To show Israelis that the new Fateh-Hamas government is more than a facade to allow Europe to resume massive funding, Palestinian leaders must end incitement and terror. There is no evidence that the Fateh "security forces" are suddenly going to be effective, while from Damascus and Tehran, Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal and others embrace religious extremism and repeat calls for the destruction of Israel. Talk of a 20 or even 40-year truce is neither credible nor beneficial.

History has shown that outside involvement, including the Oslo effort, is also likely to fail. The November 2005 agreement brokered by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and accompanied by a public relations blitz was followed by more attacks, massive arms imports via Egypt and the quick collapse of the European security role. In the shadow of daily rocket attacks and the June 2006 cross-border raid from Gaza in which Gilad Shalit was kidnapped, talk about peace negotiations seems hopelessly out of touch.

Although the Israeli leadership is pragmatic, reflecting the broad consensus supporting a realistic two-state solution, this government is also very weak and the societal agenda is focused on scandals and investigations. True, reports of talks with the Saudis--long seen as the main source of Islamic religious opposition to Jewish sovereignty--have generated a buzz. And when the opposition, led by Binyamin Netanyahu, attempts to topple PM Ehud Olmert, momentum from a regional "peace process" will be the government's strongest card.

But the weakness of both the government and the two major coalition parties, Kadima and Labor, limits flexibility. In December 2000, after Ehud Barak's government had collapsed and polls showed a huge lead for opposition leader Ariel Sharon, the last-ditch negotiations in Taba were widely condemned as illegitimate--particularly on core identity issues. Israelis see Palestinian claims to a "right of return" as another version of the core rejectionism that seeks to end Jewish sovereignty and has fuelled the conflict since 1947. And the core issue of Jerusalem is viewed from the perspective of 1948-1967, when the armistice agreement guaranteeing Jewish access to sacred sites in the Old City, including the Western Wall and Temple Mount, was ignored.

On this basis Olmert, Likud leader Binyamin Netanyahu or one of the former senior IDF officers who might emerge as prime minister can explore options with the Saudis as part of the drive for overall regional stability and the anti-Iranian effort. In this context, photo-ops with Abbas and positive words about resuming talks with Palestinian officials (not with Hamas members) provide an acceptable cover.

And while the Arab League might again be able to lead the divided and unfocused Palestinians (as part of the de facto trusteeship that has developed), it will also have to show Israelis that this is not another "peace" plan that increases the risk of war and terror. If the wording adopted in Beirut in March 2002 is presented as a "take it or leave" statement, including the language on refugee claims, the Arab plan is a non-starter.

Under these circumstances, and with no strong leaders among the major players, there is little reason to expect a breakthrough. At best, Palestinian and Israeli officials might resume limited negotiations on pragmatic conflict management and humanitarian aid measures, if these are not exploited for terror as in the past. Beyond the "who" of negotiations lies the "what", and while the Iranian threat can lead to regional security cooperation that includes Israel, the foundation for resolving the long-standing Palestinian issues will take a long time to develop.

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