

Overselling Peace Hopes, Again

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Following the Annapolis meeting and President's Bush's tour, everyone is talking about peace. And real peace, meaning acceptance of Israel as a Jewish State, and an end to violence and demonization, would be a huge accomplishment. If US President George W. Bush can accomplish this during his final year in office, we will all be grateful.

But past experience raises many questions, and requires us to temper this optimism with some down-to-earth realism. When grand peace initiatives fail, the damage is huge, and instead of moving forward, we end up moving backwards, bringing even greater violence and isolation. The celebrated Oslo peace process ended with the Palestinian campaign of mass terror, in which over 1000 Israeli lives were lost only a few years ago. In parallel, the political war which exploited the language of human rights for demonization, sought to isolate Israel through boycotts, divestment and sanctions.

The new American optimism and good intentions notwithstanding, one year is a very short period in which to resolve all of the complexities of this entrenched conflict. Internal discussions among Palestinians that might lead to compromise of the key "core issues", including recognition of Jewish history in Jerusalem, and the need to end Palestinian refugee claims, have not even started. Palestinian textbooks still do not include maps with the word "Israel". And with Hamas using Gaza to launch missiles at Sderot, and gun battles between their supporters and the Fatah loyalists, implementation of any peace agreement seems entirely unrealistic.

President Bush's latest plan is also full of internal contradictions that will take much more than 12 months to sort out. On the one hand, he has again accepted the Israeli position that the 1949 armistice lines (the pre-1967 "green line") are obsolete, and the need for defensible borders. But Palestinians ignored this and seized on Bush's demand that Israel must end the "occupation" following the 1967 war. (Israeli settlements are the least difficult dimension – once we agree on borders, there will be no settlements.)

Bush also emphasized territorial contiguity for the Palestinian state (presumably including Gaza), while at the same time, restating America's commitment to Israel's security. But if Palestinians from Hamas controlled Gaza are allowed to travel to Ramallah and Bethlehem, they will start making and firing rockets into Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. When US Secretary of State Rice forced Israel to accept an open corridor agreement a few years ago, terror quickly increased and the agreement was frozen. Wishful thinking is not enough to resolve this.

The latest peace push will be accompanied by demands that Israel dismantle or reduce its security presence in the West Bank. At every opportunity, Palestinians repeat the mantra that Israeli check-points, travel restrictions, military positions, security barriers, etc. are humiliating and make peace impossible. Similarly, we are told that the

development of the Palestinian economy, including job creation and the creation of a “peace constituency”, also requires these changes in Israeli security policy. And such claims are repeated, usually without question, by journalists, diplomats, and even by some Israeli pundits and politicians.

Here again, the gap between hope and reality is too big to ignore. Humanitarian aid shipments from the UN and Europe are still used for smuggling bombs. And a few years ago, when Israel removed checkpoints, reduced its security presence, and allowed the arming and training of Palestinian “police”, these good-will measures were exploited for terror. At the height of this violence, in 2002, when hundreds of Israelis were killed and disfigured in mass bombings, the so-called international community condemned Israeli responses in Jenin and elsewhere as “war crimes”. The Arab delegitimation campaign is continuing in the United Nations, the media, among doubtful “human-rights” groups, on university campuses (such as “Israel Apartheid Week”), and elsewhere.

In these ways, the costs of failure are much too high to ignore. Instead of trying to create an idealized peace, the failure of Oslo showed that conflict management is more realistic. Small pragmatic steps that tackle one issue at a time will not salvage Bush’s legacy, but they are better than another disaster.

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