

January 9, 2009

Analysis: Diplomatic Front – The Cease-Fire Game

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Every political leader and diplomat wants to be seen as the key actor, or at least a major player, in the cease-fire game. The appearance of peacemaking suggests international power and prestige, and is accompanied by meetings in exotic settings, providing excellent photo-opportunities and constant press coverage.

Politicians thrive on the process, and politically correct talk about ending the "humanitarian suffering of Palestinians" gains them a major boost.

As a result, the field has become more crowded, including Turkey, Russia, numerous Europeans, the UN Secretary General, Qatar, Egypt and - far more quietly - the outgoing Bush administration in the US.

But most of these mediators have little to offer in terms of substance. Indeed, the gap between the public relations and the detailed negotiations towards a sustainable end to conflict is huge. In many cases, beyond the photos and press statements, these virtual mediators do not have the knowledge or resources required for this complex process.

This is the case for the cease-fire initiatives of French President Nicolas Sarkozy and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, both of whom gain primarily from the media attention. Israel is playing along with the facade in part to enhance the prestige of these leaders, and in part because the appearance of a readiness to negotiate a cease-fire softens the hostile media image, particularly in Europe.

In reality, a stable cease-fire requires an external actor that has the depth, power and political will to insure that the terms are implemented - otherwise, the violence will resume and escalate. In the failed Oslo process, when incitement and large scale

Palestinian terror resumed, Norway was not willing to take any of the risks or pay any of the costs in confronting Arafat.

In Gaza, for the three years following the Israeli disengagement, Egypt has failed to stop Hamas from acquiring weapons, and numerous summits in Cairo involving top Hamas leaders have had no visible impact. Whether this is due to the weakness of the regime or ambivalence regarding the relationship with Israel is unclear, but to be taken seriously, Egypt must clearly demonstrate that it can provide more than rhetoric.

Europe in general, and France in particular, are in a similar position, as shown by the failure in implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which ended the 2006 Lebanon war. Speeches and the expanded international force have not prevented Hizbullah from rebuilding and increasing its arsenal of rockets, and its ability to use them. (Skeptics dismiss UNIFIL's recent 'discovery' of some rockets near the Israeli border as a ploy - the four rockets launched on Thursday were not found in advance.) Similarly, the experiment involving European monitors at the Rafah crossing based on the 2005 agreement ended quickly when the monitors fled at the sight of the first Hamas gunmen. Europeans give advice generously, but do not have the ability or will to ensure Israeli security when the agreements they broker are violated.

As a result, America remains the indispensable country, and the only potential power that can give credibility to a stable and serious cease-fire agreement. But America is overstretched in Iraq and Afghanistan, and involvement in Gaza would be limited to technical advisers on detecting and blowing up the tunnels under the Philadelphi corridor used to smuggle missiles.

Thus, as in many previous conflicts, the stability of the cease-fire will be largely determined by Israeli military achievements and the decisions made by the political leadership. A premature end will simply serve as the starting point for the next and expanded round of this war.

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