

Long Term Prospects for Arab-Israeli Peace

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

On February 3, 1994, Asher Susser, director of Tel Aviv University's Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, and Martin Kramer, associate director of the Dayan Center, addressed The Washington Institute's Policy Forum on the long-term potential for peace in the Middle East. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

ASHER SUSSER

Oslo: A Reversal of Madrid

The Declaration of Principles (DOP) signed by Israel and the PLO in Oslo in 1993 was a remarkable breakthrough in the peace process, achieved in part by reversing the logical sequence of events envisioned at the Madrid conference two years earlier.

The Madrid formula clearly outlined the interim arrangements for Palestinian self-rule, and left the final goal of the negotiations undefined. The Oslo accord, however, seems to pre-ordain some form of Palestinian state -- confederated with either Jordan, Israel, or both -- and requires the parties to go back and negotiate the interim arrangements that will get them to that point.

This reversal has created a conceptual gap between the Israelis and the Palestinians that is making those negotiations difficult. The PLO craves the symbols and prerogatives of sovereignty, and sees the negotiations as an obstacle to be surmounted as quickly as possible; Israel is in no hurry to promote the nascent state, and seeks at every phase of the negotiations to maximize its own security.

The Role of Elections

More than an exercise in democracy and self-rule, the elections in Gaza and Jericho will have resounding historical significance for the peace process as a whole. Municipal elections will be an effective means of testing popular Palestinian support for the Oslo accord, as well as a tool to gauge the power and influence of opponents like Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

At the same time, elections for the interim Palestinian council that will govern the autonomous areas will also serve to transform the PLO into a "1967 organization," whose efforts are focused on the transfer of authority in the West

Bank and Gaza, rather than a "1948 organization" that continues to dwell on issues dating back to Israel's declaration of independence. Israel will not debate issues that challenge its existence as a state.

The End of the Silent Partnership with Jordan?

By denying the PLO a formal role at the Madrid conference and confining its representatives to a joint Palestinian-Jordanian delegation, Israel allowed Jordan to play a central role in the negotiations and limit Palestinian autonomy to benefit their common interests.

The Oslo framework challenges the forty-year "silent partnership" between Israel and Jordan, in which the stability of the Hashemite regime has been a sine qua non of Israeli national security policy, and the two sides have cooperated to contain the Palestinian aspirations. King Hussein's fear of being marginalized by the Gaza-Jericho agreement compelled him to sign a hasty peace agenda with Israel less than twenty-four hours after the signing of the DOP.

The Question of Confederation

Although the term "confederation" generally refers to an association between or among sovereign states, each of the parties has adopted a definition that suits its interests. Arafat views confederation as a convenient, short-term mechanism to assuage Israeli and Jordanian concerns and jumpstart the Palestinian economy, but he is wary of excessive interference. Israel and Jordan, on the other hand, see confederation as a long-term relationship that will allow them to control the development of the Palestinian entity, limit its political and economic independence, and avoid being presented with a PLO fait accompli.

MARTIN KRAMER

As the Arab-Israeli conflict moves toward resolution, fundamentalist groups have dedicated themselves to hindering any reconciliation between Israel and the Arab states. Aware that they lack the means to erase the progress made thus far, these groups are determined to obstruct the process, and perhaps eventually prevail in changing popular attitudes toward peace.

For Israelis, personal security perhaps ranks above all other concerns in the peace process. Random terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians turn public support against any territorial compromise that, at least on paper, makes them seem more vulnerable.

A Change in Strategy

The negotiations among Israel, Syria, and Lebanon have reduced the ability of fundamentalist groups outside the occupied territories to carry out operations with the blessing and support of their erstwhile patrons. As a result, the rejectionists have adopted a new strategy of political participation in their host countries. In the 1992 parliamentary elections in Lebanon, for example, Hezbollah candidates won all of their contests.

By entering government non-violently and thereby gaining legitimacy, the radicals are in a unique position to mobilize opposition both in government and in the streets against any peace accord, while still supporting and carrying out terrorist activities against Israel and other opponents.

A Cultural War Against Peace

In addition, these groups are well aware that peace between governments is not the same as peace between peoples. Even if they cannot prevent a peace treaty from being signed through violent or political means, Hezbollah and other rejectionist groups can ensure that it will be a "cold peace" at the grassroots level. Islamic law and culture -- for example, fatwas prohibiting Israeli visitors or the purchase of Israeli goods -- will serve as the basis for resisting acceptance of Israel as a "normal" member in the Middle Eastern community.

Hamas and the Gaza-Jericho Accord

Like Hezbollah, Hamas realizes it is outnumbered by peace supporters, and seeks a legitimate place in government. Unlike its ideological ally, however, Hamas has a presence in the territories. While it rejects any participation in the governing authority in Gaza or the West Bank, Hamas is actively seeking employment for its members in virtually all aspects of Palestinian civil life, ranging from tax collection to education.

At present, the PLO is reportedly offering Hamas 25 percent of available jobs in the new bureaucracy. By infiltrating in this fashion, Hamas can provide core services to constituents, mobilize support against reconciliation with Israel, and continue to commit acts of terrorism against Israel and proponents of peace.

Controlling Fundamentalism: Cooption vs. Containment

The Arab countries must respond to the challenge posed by radical Islamic movements such as Hamas and Hezbollah. However, the United States should caution governments against allowing fundamentalists to participate in government as a means of cooption, lest they repeat the failed experiments of nations like Algeria. Cooption runs the risk of actually bolstering the power of these groups, and in some situations, has destabilized entire nations. Forceful containment of radical movements may be the only viable option for confronting the threat they pose.

Conclusions

While progress in the peace process continues, Hamas and Hezbollah are preparing for the next phase of conflict against Israel; a conflict to be fought from within. Potentially, these groups can do to the Middle East peace process what the Russian parliament has done to reform -- hinder progress and undermine popular support.

This Policy Forum report was prepared by Daniel Seligson. ❖

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