

The Roadmap, the Fence, and the Prospects for Israeli-Palestinian Peace (Part I)

Sep 19, 2003



In-Depth Reports

Contrary to some expectations, I believe there is a good chance to turn the peace process around and continue a serious and meaningful dialogue between the Israeli government and the Palestinian representatives. (It is hard for me to say "the Palestinian government" at this point. I hope that there will eventually be a government able to take meaningful responsibility for the Palestinians.) There is an important group within the Palestinian leadership that is seriously interested in change. We have met over the last few years, particularly during the last few months. They are a remarkable group of people -- Minister Amir among them -- who recognize that a majority of Palestinians are sick and tired of the current situation, of having to pay a terrible price for the terror that is perpetrated by a relatively small group of Palestinians.

There are those in the Palestinian leadership who are committed to stopping the terror. We do not yet know whether they are capable of doing so, or whether they are ready to pay the inevitable price. It is incumbent upon them to prove their willingness to do so at some point. But we recognize that they are genuine when they say they want to stop it. This represents a dramatic change from the past. I have no doubt that former Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) was genuinely committed to change. I have no doubt that Minister of State for Security Affairs Muhammad Dahlan was seriously committed to stopping terror. And many more, including Minister Amir, have tried to initiate some changes. This is difficult. For a long time, his ministry has been a primary inspiration for terror -- with daily incitement by Palestinian radio stations and television channels, calling for the liquidation of the state of Israel, calling Jews the worst enemies of humanity, and so on.

There is still a chance that we can restore meaningful dialogue from a process that seems to have collapsed. I am hesitant to say more; it is too early to talk about an agreement. Right now, it is popular to talk about the political constraints on the Palestinian side. I remember that when Abu Mazen took over as prime minister, his allies argued that we must make every possible effort to help him because he was so weak, because he faced pressure from all sides. They told us that Yasir Arafat was manipulating events against him and that Arab countries were trying to sabotage him. They told us if we did not help, everything would go to hell. It was a sound argument given the circumstances, if somewhat exaggerated.

But much less attention was given to the political constraints on the Israeli government. The truth is that the Israeli government never had, and still does not have, the flexibility that some assume it has. This must be recognized. A year ago, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, talking to the Central Committee of the Likud Party, proposed that the Likud agree in principle to the future establishment of a Palestinian state. He was outvoted by a majority in his own party. It is true that he was subsequently reelected to the leadership of the Likud, and then was reelected prime minister. But the majority of the party's delegation in parliament opposes the two-state solution.

Recently, the Likud Party held another convention where the prime minister and I found it difficult even to make our presentations. We were booed by the majority of those in attendance because we were representing government policy with regard to the release of prisoners and a possible two-state solution. When we had a cabinet vote on the

release of prisoners, the vote was tied. We had to make some lastminute changes in order to get a majority. This is not because we have a weak prime minister or a divided government. This is because there is a strong public opinion in Israel -- which happens to be a democratic country, something uncommon in the Middle East -- that is tired of making compromises that are met only by more terror.

The prime minister and the Israeli government are committed to the basic principles of the Quartet's Roadmap to Israeli-Palestinian peace. We are not in love with the Roadmap, but we accept it. We want to give the new, emerging reality in the Middle East a chance -- based on the assumption that terror will be stopped entirely by the Palestinians. The fact that it has not yet been stopped is a major source of aggravation and doubt for many Israelis, who are not prepared to give the Israeli government much more flexibility as long as terror persists.

The political constraints facing Palestinians are well known, but they are important to mention. First and foremost, there is a question as to whether a Palestinian government can rid itself of the terrible, negative influence of Yasir Arafat. There can be no doubt at this point that Arafat was the main cause of Abu Mazen's failure. Above and beyond the rivalries within the Palestinian political establishment, Abu Mazen was pushing for policies totally unacceptable to Arafat. To the best of our knowledge, Yasir Arafat is very much behind some of the most brutal recent terrorist attacks that caused the suspension in the peace process. Abu Mazen stood for meaningful political dialogue without the daily horrors of terror.

The question of whether Palestinians can overcome the influence of Arafat and create a constructive, responsible government is still a crucial one that will have to be answered by the new Palestinian government. The question is not who will be prime minister. Abu Mazen is a fine person. Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala), his replacement as prime minister, is a fine person. But Palestinians have to make sure that the prime minister they select is one who both can and will fight the terrorism Arafat wants to preserve as an option.

The choice is not just between continuing the status quo or, hopefully, rejoining a dialogue that might ultimately lead to an agreement. There is another option. The political influence of the United States is one of the most driving forces in this process. If the two sides are able to move forward, then the Bush administration will provide all of its good services in order to help. But everyone understands that the intense involvement of the U.S. government is not without limits. If things do not start to move, the Bush administration will be busy with other things. And if that happens, there is always room for the State of Israel to take unilateral steps to provide more security and stability. Such measures will be independent of any cooperation or agreement with the Palestinians. They would have good results in terms of security, but would indefinitely delay the chances for a meaningful political dialogue.

Therefore, the real choice is between a return to the Roadmap's framework of a decisive war against terror -- mostly by the Palestinians -- on the one hand, and unilateral Israeli measures to create total separation between Israelis and Palestinians on the other. A return to the Roadmap, with committed Palestinian action against terror, would be met with extended economic and political cooperation. As someone who was appointed by the prime minister to be in charge of economic initiatives between Israel and the Palestinians, I can tell you that there are serious opportunities for meaningful economic partnership. I am not talking about economic domination; the Israeli government does not think in those terms. But real economic cooperation can develop only if terror stops and bilateral relations return to what they were in the Aqaba period.

I am here to say that the Israeli government, under the leadership of Ariel Sharon, is prepared to move back to the framework of the Roadmap. We are prepared to do this with all the possible consequences and in spite of growing opposition among Israelis and within the circles that traditionally support the Likud government. We will make this move on one condition: the Palestinians must stop terrorism and must be prepared to dismantle the infrastructure of terror.

It is now clear to everyone that you cannot fool around and acquiesce to terrorist organizations, believing that their terror will eventually just disappear. As long as Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hizballah are alive and active in Gaza and the West Bank, there will be terror. You cannot ignore it, and you cannot avoid it. You have to fight it. Are the Palestinians ready to do so? Time will tell.

Nabil Amr addressed the conference on this same topic. [Read his remarks. \(templateC07.php?CID=194\)](#) ❖

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