

Prospects for Ending the Conflict:

A Palestinian View

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Brief Analysis

The wishes of the Palestinian and Israeli peoples and the situation in which they find themselves mandate a resolution to the conflict. The fact that all three parties--Americans, Palestinians and Israelis--are motivated to reach a deal quickly makes this goal more readily attainable. However, in spite of the wish to reach an agreement before the American elections, this need is not absolute, for two reasons. Firstly, the peace process is not a partisan issue in the U.S. It is not a real catastrophe if an agreement doesn't take place in the next six weeks because negotiations are going to continue with whoever is elected, Gore or Bush. Secondly, "lame duck" presidents have managed in the past to accomplish great things in the Middle East.

Like the Israelis, the Palestinians have also made compromises from their initial positions. They understand that this is not a typical colonization like the French occupation of Algeria. Israel is inhabited by a people with a long history of victimization with a real emotional attachment to the land. This means that it is not possible to simply end the presence of the other party, but that a way must be found to live together. The Palestinians have also changed their commitment to the 1967 borders to a requirement to gain territory equivalent to the surface area of the 1967 borders (2,400 sq. miles) rather than to the lines itself. This allows for a greater flexibility and for land exchanges. However, the Israelis must understand that for total and comprehensive peace, the agreement must be accepted by all the Arab nations, and that places further pressure on Arafat. The Israelis withdrew from one hundred percent of the occupied territory when dealing with Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon, and that sets a good precedent for Israel's dealing with the Palestinians.

The Camp David Negotiations Camp David was the single most important negotiating phenomenon in the history of the conflict. In spite of the fact that the negotiations were undertaken with no preparation, almost all the issues advanced considerably, in a manner that tested the imagination of both sides. For example, this was the first time a full and honest discussion of the refugee issue occurred.

Regrettably, some of the advances made in the Camp David talks were lost, since the understandings were not finalized in a written framework. It was also inevitable that the sides would cast blame on each other, since both parties had to defend themselves against the accusation that they had failed. A mistake in the Camp David negotiations was the relative lack of direct contact between Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian Authority (PA) chairman Yasir Arafat.

As for future negotiations, they should be entered into as soon as possible so as not to lose all the momentum of Camp David. The talks now should not be between Arafat and Barak, but rather professional negotiators, who can generate enough success to allow the leaders to make decisive decisions at the proper moment. As for the U.S. administration, it should not be directly involved in the negotiations but rather remain in the background, monitoring and supporting. As far as possible, the negotiations should not be in the public eye.

Ending the Conflict The Palestinians cannot commit themselves to ending the conflict before a peace agreement is

reached, since they have very few bargaining chips, and must therefore hold onto their one card until the very last stage. But if an agreement is reached in the next weeks, it will have to include a statement that the conflict has ended.

There are two good reasons to be optimistic about the future of Palestinian-Israeli relations. First, the PA has managed to prevent Hamas terrorist attacks. In the last year, the number of casualties from terrorism was the lowest since 1967: only two killed. Second, the Palestinians are the only Arabs who currently have normal, everyday relations with Israelis. These two points show that the Palestinians have accepted that they must live alongside Israel and deal with the Israeli concerns.

Furthermore, normalization is a process and will require incremental progress. The Palestinians have made great progress regarding the presentation of history in their schoolbooks. The textbooks used during all the years of Israeli occupation, with the approval of the Israeli authorities, were much worse than those just issued by the PA. To be sure, the PA texts do not show a map of Israel, but textbooks used in Israel do not show the map of Palestine. It is unfair to put the full burden of preparing people for peace on the PA leadership. After all, Israel constitutes an existential threat to Palestine, while the reverse is not true. The disparity of the relations between the Palestinians and Israel means that it will be some time before the final stage of people to people peace and full reconciliation is reached.

Ideas for the Future A new economic order in the Middle East is an unavoidable necessity, requiring new modes of interaction. The tourism and high-tech sectors must be given priority, and this might change the relationship between the Palestinian and the Israeli job markets: instead of being exclusively a source of unskilled labor, the Palestinian state can become a source of high-level manpower. The combination of the hungry information technology (IT) market in Israel and the abundance of IT experts in the Palestinian Diaspora will balance the relationship between the two sides and create a mutual dependence.

Jerusalem must remain a unified city, and yet function as two capitals simultaneously. This means that an agreement for joint planning and zoning must be worked out.

In order for the trauma of the refugees to be laid to rest, the understandings reached in Camp David must be translated into a viable agreement. This means recognition of their rights by Israel and a free choice between returning to their homes and fair compensation. There is no way of predicting how many Palestinians will actually take advantage of the opportunity; after all, if asked now, every refugee will feel as a point of honor that he or she must commit to return. For the conflict to end, the refugees' rights as former landowners must be recognized. Palestinians felt very happy to see the U.S. government promoting a settlement of Jewish claims from the Holocaust, because they would like to follow that precedent. The UN Conciliation Commission did detailed work in the 1950s establishing what is owed to hundreds of thousands of Palestinian claimants, and Israel and the PA both have those computerized records.

The peoples on both sides are sometimes ahead of the leaders in accepting compromises. There is good reason to hope for the future if both sides compromise. But there are limits to what the Palestinians can do. As the slogans scrawled in Gaza said, "Arafat, hold high the green olive branch but remember the red lines."

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Rachel Stroumsa.

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