

Don't Expect Magic in the Mideast

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Articles & Testimony

Sighs of relief sound the same regardless of their underlying meaning. It is therefore, easy to gloss over the distinctions among those hailing Ehud Barak's landslide victory over Benjamin Netanyahu in Monday's Israeli elections, and to focus on the common aspects of relief heard in the sighs:

A long divisive election period is over, and a man who had created enemies among ideological friends and foes alike is gone. The U.S. administration and the Israeli government can rebuild close ties after a period of coolness that has bordered on animosity.

After an initial honeymoon period, though, the differences in reasons for celebrating Barak's victory will become apparent. While American and Arab leaders have viewed these elections as a referendum on peace, Israelis treated them as a referendum on Netanyahu's leadership.

For many Israelis, who are frustrated with the growing rifts between religious and secular Jews and between immigrants from different regions, the usual order of priorities was reversed. Voters were thinking more about their battles with each other than conflicts with their neighbors. Israelis rejected Netanyahu as much for his exacerbation of internal Israeli divisions as for his mishandling of foreign affairs. Most Israelis do indeed want the peace process to move responsibly forward; they want the "peace with security" that Netanyahu successfully campaigned on in 1996 but failed to deliver.

American and Arab officials who are celebrating Netanyahu's defeat should keep in mind that Barak's positions on peace-process issues more closely resemble those of Netanyahu than those of Shimon Peres.

Yes, the change in style and tone will be welcome and will go far to improve the negotiating atmosphere. This factor is significant and will provide the new sense of momentum that Barak has promised to infuse into the long-stagnant peace process.

But if more than that is assumed -- if this electoral change is expected to heal wounds instantly and resolve complex outstanding issues -- bitter disappointment will be the inevitable result.

The new positive atmosphere will not magically bridge the gaps between Israel and the Palestinians on polarizing final-status issues such as Jerusalem, about which Barak is as adamant as Netanyahu. It will not erase the dramatic differences between the amount of West Bank land Israel is willing to withdraw from and the amount Palestinians want, or between the type of state Palestinians want to form and the restrictions upon which Israelis insist for their security.

Barak will most likely slow the growth of Israeli settlements on the West Bank, but he will not implement the freeze that Palestinians and the Clinton administration would prefer. Nor will the more congenial atmosphere provide easy solutions to problems such as refugees or water. While Barak represents the type of peace agreement that an overwhelming majority desire, this may not be an agreement that the Palestinians will accept.

The recipe for a post-honeymoon letdown was being written for months before the elections, as leaders around the

world joined in the mantra, "Wait until after the Israeli elections." Impatient Palestinians were told by American, European and Arab leaders to hold off on a unilateral declaration of statehood because their goals could be reached more effectively after the voting. U.S. officials spoke of a new goal of completing final status talks a year from the original May 4, 1999, target date set by the Oslo accords, while other governments asked for a mere six-month extension until the end of the year.

These pleas for the Palestinians to delay their declaration implied not a sense of confidence that Barak would win the election, but also a belief that Barak would agree to compromises Netanyahu would never consider.

The confidence in Barak's victory proved well-founded, but the assumption that Barak would offer a great deal of substantive flexibility is misguided.

Chances for long-term success in the peace process will be highest if American officials encourage Israel's neighbors to focus less on unrealistic expectations and time constraints and more on reciprocal concessions that could turn the improved diplomatic climate into a lasting, stable peace.



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